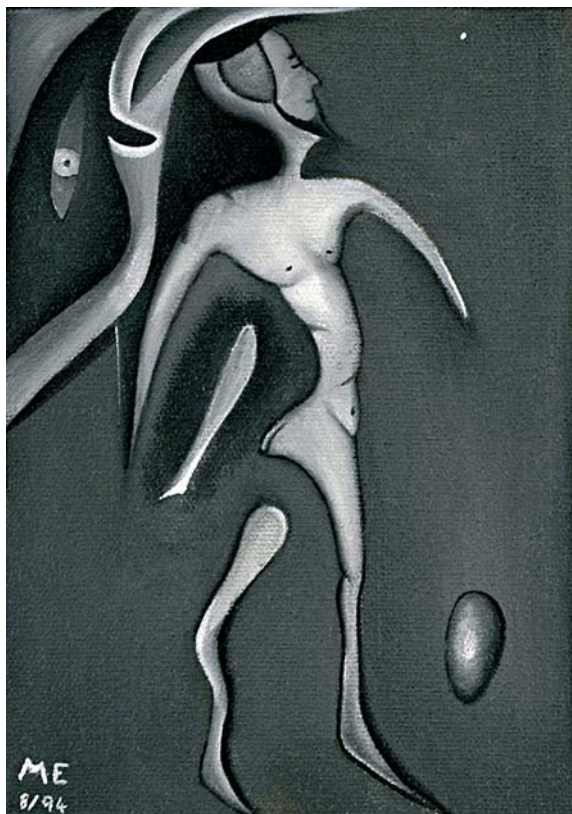


# Soul of a Harpist



*dreamed by Karim Chaibi*





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*dreamed by Karim Chaibi*

2005



To Magic and Beauty  
To Lora and our children  
Abraham, Miriam and Giselle

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To those who helped me in editing and translating my work, I offer my warm thanks for your patience. Michael Frontczak spent many hours editing these works with me, and Jessica Raimi, David Cummins, Zuzana Polakovičová, Milan Turek, Zuzana Vilikovska and Verona Conant also worked with me on my writing.

Foremost, my thanks go to Lora Berg for participating in the creation of this book at every step of the way. I could not have made this book without her.



## *Editor's Note*

Born in Tunis in 1963 and raised in a traditional neighborhood, Karim Chaibi attended a French Jesuit school and later studied Islamic theology at the Zitouna University. While involved as a student in matters Islamic and political like many in his generation, Karim also developed a strong interest in the arts and avidly crafted original stories for friends in the Tunisian oral tradition. Karim left Tunisia in 1991 and has since adopted English, the flexible world language in which he now creates stories for a broader audience. As an adult, Karim also taught himself to paint. He has lived and worked in Tunisia, the U.S., Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Slovakia.

This book may entertain and provoke readers interested in aesthetics, philosophy and surrealism, as well as readers of tales, offering an extravagant journey to the shadow lands between connection and solitude. The cultural references of North Africa ripple through these tales, from pre-Islamic gods who once frequented the Mediterranean, to Islamic traditions, and even images from Christianity. A contribution to Arab American as well as North African literature, Karim Chaibi's tales shine light on the inner life of an Arab generation at the intersection of East and West, as in the unfortunate valet of "The Confessional" who is deprived successively of his fingers, tongue and memory by battling kings.

When telling stories, Karim shifts easily between Arabic, French and

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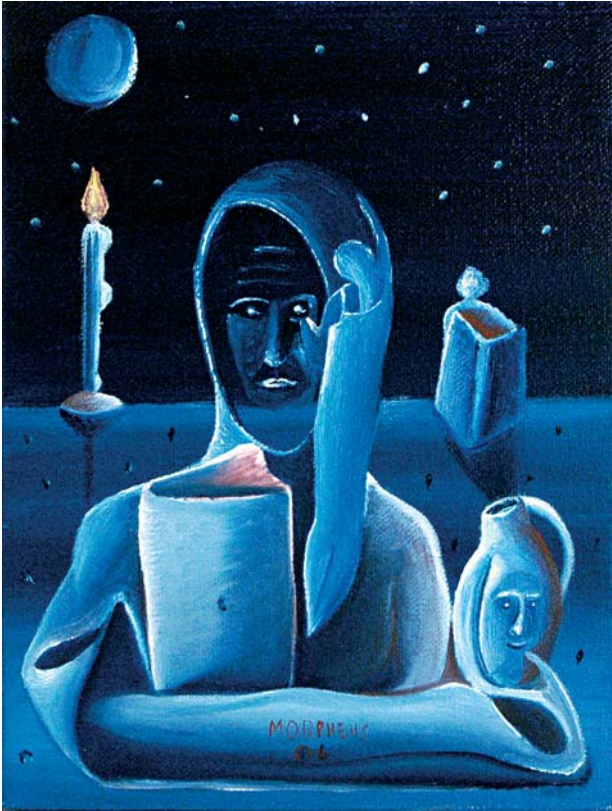
English, changing details with each telling of a tale. These written stories are hence his still shot of something alive and flowing. Karim's plots are jewel-like, while his dialogues sound dreamlike and archetypal as in a fairy tale. The kings may be elliptical, the queens filled with troubling queries, the servants and scribes pawns of the gods appealing in their discomfiture; yet each faces a fate only Karim could have imagined. Tragedy prevails, though largely in good humor.

Karim's inner world is at once surreal and charmed, peopled by talking shadows, melting bodies and drunken sculptors. Intent as a glass-blower, he shapes this realm of artistic purity, using a seemingly fragile medium to mount his defense against the stark preaching of a failed generation - one still trumpeting ancient surnames, fallen from high Ottoman posts through French occupation and into postcolonial bitterness. The North African haze of borrowed cigarettes and sweet coffees, of sexual frustration and court intrigue infuse these stories. Out of such alienation, Karim Chaibi manages to craft these uniquely imaginative and memorable tales.

I hope you will welcome Karim's book. I have lent a native speaker's ear in editing these tales. As Karim's friend and spouse, I am sure that he would appreciate receiving readers' responses to his writing by email at: [karim@arabsurreal.com](mailto:karim@arabsurreal.com)

Lora Berg  
Bratislava, Slovakia  
October, 2005





## *The Book of Wisdom*

In one of my dreams, just before leaving Eden, the first couple held hands at the garden gate and asked for mercy. When the Lord saw them kneeling among the roses, he felt pity and granted them a book that in his own words would match what might have been theirs, had they but remained in paradise. He said he was giving them wisdom, and so they ventured to call this gift “The Book of Wisdom.” Watering their footsteps with tears, Adam and Eve left paradise. And when they finally stepped out of their fears and reached their new earthly home, the land seemed to them very sorry. Hungry and regretful, they turned to the book of wisdom and sought its help.

The first chapter proved to be so deep that it was very difficult to read. Adam and Eve therefore sated their thirst by studying only the first page, from which they gained inspiration even about practical topics such as how to eat, what to wear, and where to sleep. Indeed, they found so much knowledge on that first page that for as long as they lived, no need arose for them to wander beyond it. Just holding the book of wisdom seemed to guarantee the pair a measure of comfort. Their lives unfolded in calm and plenitude. When nearing in due course the realm of death, they decided to bequeath the book of wisdom to their oldest child. The couple instructed this heir to protect the book, to consult it, and above all, to fear its creator. He in turn found satisfaction both in following and teaching the advice of the book. A glimpse at the

first page answered even those questions that he hadn't had time to formulate.

Time flew and the heir's final hour came. In order to protect that written treasure from the indifference of daily life, he decided to bequeath the book to the most obedient youth in the land, though perhaps not the most intelligent. Through this inspiration, he hoped to keep at a distance the vice of superfluous curiosity. After all, he thought, what good does intelligence serve when the sum of wisdom is already contained in a book? Nevertheless over time, heirs dared to cross the threshold of further pages. The world became more complex; the need arose to know more, and still the book of wisdom did not fail. Heir after heir thrived on having more answers than questions.

Hundreds of years passed, and heirs enjoyed the pleasure of wisdom at no cost except the roll of an eye, until one day by coincidence an heir felt a flickering of curiosity, and flipped to a page of the book toward the middle. There, he was shocked to find that the text had completely disappeared. This lad did not panic, though he worried. He realized that emptiness could become the fate of his peers. Perhaps the divine word could not endure the effect of time, he pondered; perhaps, although perfect, the divine word was born with an innate flaw. He closed the book gently, and though still a youth, expired on the spot.

The next heir who had the joy of guarding this treasure was a hardier soul, and concluded right away that due to over-reading, pages were being erased. He quickly determined that the book's shortcoming was to erase itself upon being read. For lack of an alternative, he decided to read only occasionally, and also forbade transcribing the secrets of the book onto other pages, for copying required intensive reading and might therefore speed up the erasure. Nevertheless and no matter what precautions he took, the text dwindled more and more.

In succession, heirs learned not to meddle with the book, each deciding to consult it even less than those who came before. Some chose to hang the book high on the wall of their studies, hoping to limit their own access to its contents. Others covered it with a veil while reading

## *The Book of Wisdom*

it. Some didn't accept the need to keep distant from mankind's favored source of knowledge, so they would voraciously read the book, even while witnessing the disappearance of large chunks of words.

In this way, numerous chapters vanished. Still, some pages were left with a dot, while others kept one or two letters. About this time, a few clever heirs started to comment on what they considered to be god's will. The disappearance could not be coincidental. Each heir when confronted with an empty page or a page with just one dot concocted an explanation that he placed beneath the book. At the base of the wall where the book of wisdom hung at that particular time, hundreds of pages of commentary and interpretative text started to pile up. If the written word can be divine, then so must be its surrounding emptiness.

It became customary for heirs to come across long documents starting with "The blank page number 355 means..." or "The dot that occupies page number 477 can only mean..." Heirs while not bound to follow their predecessors could not completely disregard what others had said about the blanks. Some ventured to argue against interpretations of the blank advanced by their predecessors, for they thought that if the book was meant to be read, then the blank should be part of its alphabet. In this way, readers were invited to read beyond the written word. A mere nothing suffices for a wise man to invent a world.

In time, the erasure slowed due to this voluntary ignorance concerning the book's contents. Still, of the thousands of pages of words the book had once held, only one remained. Under this difficult circumstance, the wise heir of the moment decided that only one reading of the book would be allowed to each guardian; though of course he was only putting off the inevitable. The last page emptied itself still more, until only one comma lingered there. For a time, heirs spent their days interpreting this comma. The comma means this, the comma means that, so and so according to the comma. Heirs contented themselves with reading and interpreting the immeasurable emptiness by which the comma was surrounded. At least they were still basing themselves upon the book, and that was enough to feel infallible - up

until the day when one wise heir on the brink of death prepared to pass on a volume formed completely of virgin pages.

From his bed, this long bearded one summoned a pious youngster to be rewarded for his studious nature. The new heir rushed and gushed into the room of the wisest man in the world. Realizing that he had been chosen, he knelt by the bed, anticipating a few choked words about the weight of his inheritance. The wise one, barely able to keep his eyes open, pointed to a book upon a shelf behind him. The young heir reached slowly to the book and held it between his arms while kneeling again, still anticipating wise words with the transfer of power. He received only a faint smile and a whispered “Never cease to read.” For lack of energy or lack of words the wise one added naught. He coughed and struggled to keep his eyes open, and dared to share one more attempt at a smile. His eyes then glazed over, even while staring at the book of wisdom that the new heir clutched in wonder.

Once he had returned to his own modest abode, this youth knelt and thanked the almighty for choosing him to be the sole heir of wisdom. Already, a pile of notes, commentaries and books were spread around him on the floor. When done praying and asking for mercy, he surrounded himself with a number of bright candles and opened the book. A desert met his eyes. From the first motion of his fingers and his gaze, he didn't stumble upon a single blot of ink. “At least one word!” he begged. Vain were his attempts to read; neither a single word nor a diacritical mark appeared to assuage his fears. The addendums that he wished could answer his questions appeared to be mere commentary on the blank. Apparently, none of his predecessors had written or commented on the original text.

News of his election crossed the town like lightning, and reached villages in even the remotest corners of the land. None knew how lonely he was, and neither did he. Children as well as old people began to seek his help on issues ranging from dreams to games, politics to medicine. He swore that he had not yet had time for profound consultation. “What does it take to know?” wondered the seekers.

## *The Book of Wisdom*

“Open the book and read. It’s all there,” he wished he could reply, when in fact he had so far heard only from his own silence.

Daily, he became more terrified by the charged glances from those who believed he held the secret of wisdom, and terrified as well by his inability to find meaning in the emptiness he was obliged to preserve. At each intersection, at each turn of the road, before each door and from the mouth of each person he felt the press of question after question. Under such an assault, he decided at last to leave that village, where everyone thought he should be bountiful. Hiding the source of his weakness in an inner pocket of his large caftan, he gathered up a few tools to help him on his path: candles and matches, an urn of water and a paring knife. Choosing a direction away from human settlements, he wandered a long while toward the hills, and at last confided his silence to the shadowy muteness of a cave. “Maybe they will forget,” he thought.

It was a corner of the world where the width of a single thumb seemed to separate him from the sky, while thousands of years of silence distanced him from the town. At first, it seemed that the less he met people, the less he felt insignificant. But this cave where he ensconced himself, even as its dimness and dampness cloaked him with fatigue, soon seemed to appropriate for itself as well the vice of his insignificance. In fact, the cave appeared to him so inept and blank that he had the impression it was sweating.

Too far away to be seen and too silent to be heard, he felt lighter than his breath when he laid the book of wisdom on a flat stone in the center of the cave and lit a candle beside it. Patiently, he questioned the walls about the purpose of words. From the darkness, he received in answer only the faintest echoes of his solitude. His book still deaf on its altar, and he himself mute in the gloom, he hit bottom so hard that he was suddenly uplifted by a hopeful idea. Why not rewrite this book that was burdening him? Isn’t it about creation that books, in their secrets, speak? “Am I not here to seek the word?” he said suddenly, aloud, “Well, since the book is silent, why can’t I write on the creator’s

behalf?" Tentatively, he walked to the mouth of the grotto as if seeking an interlocutor. Beasts and plants wrapped in haze appeared before him, but none of the earthly creatures with whom he longed to converse appeared to fathom his isolation.

He quickly withdrew to the grotto, still pondering how and from what or whom to extract the language that had been washed from the book. With his back to the candle, he found himself fascinated by his own shadow. At once, he picked up the paring knife and sliced his shadow free, then placed the shadow in front of him. Completely unsurprised by this detachment, he called out: "Why don't we talk, pretty shadow? Surely together, we can access again the secrets from which the erasure of this book has distanced us."

"Impossible," answered the shadow in its elegance. "I am nothing except nostalgia for people and for life. Apart from the repetition of your solitude and silence, my only value is my insignificance. Really, it is of no use for you to multiply your solitude." Wavering in the candlelight, it ventured on, "As I am now, a shadow issued forth from the light of this sorry candle, I can do nothing but reaffirm your anxiety. In any case, if it is possible for me to help you, it will only be when I am accompanied by a form!"

Without a shadow but imbued with hope, the chosen one next sliced off his skin and pasted it onto the shadow. "Look at yourself; you are covered with my skin. Now, let's talk!"

"Impossible," replied his skin. "I am nothing except the ephemera of your appearance, and to charge me with the task of pulling you out from your solitude would also be nothing but appearance. In fact, even if I could speak at greater length, I would only repeat your silence. Still, if you are stubborn enough to keep talking to me, tailor for me at least the imprints of a face. Maybe in sizing up the difference between who you are and what I will become, I'll be capable of keeping you company."

The heir threw himself toward the urn in which he had first carried water to the cave. As he peered inside, he saw his reflection. The moment he saw his reflection, he pierced the water with his nails, pulled out his

## *The Book of Wisdom*

reflection and stuck it fast to his skin. “And now,” he said, “what else could you possibly need to be able to speak with me?”

“About what?” replied the bodiless shadow, “I can only replicate your silence.” Longing to give further shape to this stubborn ghost, the heir searched the grotto. He ran back and forth, stuffing his skin with mud and pebbles. Short of breath, he knelt down close to his shadow. His warm breath, faster than any comfort, pierced his shadow and suddenly made it stand up. The heir faced a pure though vague copy of himself. “You breathed life into me!” exclaimed the shadow.

The heir rose up in wonder, and stepping back in fascination whispered, “You’re alive?” Chanting, he repeated the same thing louder and louder to finish by intoning, “So can we rewrite the book of wisdom now?”

“Why should we write it?” his shadow countered, “You just created me. Isn’t that enough?”

“It’s true,” the chosen one muttered, “I just created a being. But could this be how the world first came to see the light of day? Are we but a reproduction of absolute solitude? Could creation itself be lonely to such a degree?”

“Meet yourself,” the newcomer replied to the harried heir. “You are now unique in your faceted isolation.”

“You’re lying! I still have a chance!” the heir stuttered.

“And what might that be?” his shadow laughed.

Then the solitary chosen one, propelled by the force he had gathered from his deep distress, dove back into the being that he had created. In this way recovering himself, he joyously exclaimed, “God, thank you. It’s me again!” And he patted the skin, and patted the face while watching, filled with joy, the shadow his body trailed once more. He then shouted as loudly as he could, “Lord, I am back!”

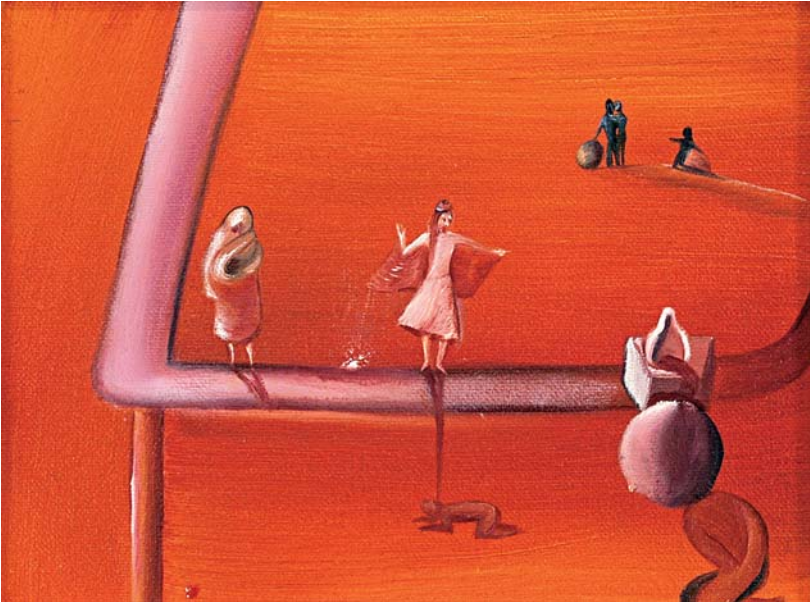
But to his surprise, his mouth articulated a sound that he could not control, saying, “This is only yourself, adorned with your numerous solitude.”

Back stooped, head lowered and eyes filled with tears, the heir looked

*dreamed by Karim Chaibi*

in silence toward the book of wisdom, mute and blank. He threw himself upon that book and armed with that sole candle from which his shadow had first poured, he set the pages aflame. But a sound from inside himself resurged and repeated, "Now, you are lonelier than ever."





## *The Confessional*

*"He who can't remember to forget, knows no more."*

*Commentary on the Book of Wisdom*

After many feints, skirmishes and allusions to peace, two estranged kings declared war on each other. The more bellicose of the two loosed a vast offensive, decimating the enemy troops, and then laid siege to the vanquished king's castle, demanding his enemy's head. Already beaten down by age and by fear of his own bodyguards, the besieged king saw no alternative but to resign himself to defeat. As the siege progressed, he concluded that he would soon lose his power, and that he should at least save what little he could of his personal domain. Holed up in his throne room, this king spoke frankly to his vizier. "I wouldn't mind losing," he sighed, "if only I did not have to witness the destruction of my legacy and my name. Between looters and dissenters, once my palace is invaded the memories and records of my reign will be reduced to ash."

"Surely, your majesty, it is only a matter of time before victory will unfold," the vizier ventured. However, even as the vizier spoke these words, the enemy began to advance into the castle with pikes, and the king knew he must prepare for disaster. First, he summoned his queen, and reviewed plans for her escape to an uncle's kingdom. He explained that she had no choice but to leave, as she would be responsible for the future of the crown prince who would travel in her company, and

one day redeem his father's name. Barely holding back her tears, the queen allowed that for the sake of posterity, perhaps she might agree to survive this tragedy.

"Yes, for posterity," agreed the king, standing a little straighter as he instructed his queen, "A king must refuse the humiliation of escape. However," he went on, "you have no time to lose!" Quickly kissing the queen's hand, he concluded, "Flee now, and even if god grants me a few more hours, at least you will be spared the scene of my defeat."

The king rubbed his neck he sat back on his throne, squared his shoulders and returned to the discussion about memories with his vizier. Hardly a magnanimous ruler, as death approached he cared only for his own memory, for he could not imagine a world without it. "In the face of such a tragedy," the king commented, "my best course would surely be to confide my memories to someone... indelibly."

"Indelibly?" the vizier responded. Sensing danger in this odd choice of word, he at once recused himself from the list of possible confidantes. "Let me venture to suggest that your valet might be a suitable candidate!" the vizier proposed. The king looked relieved at this suggestion. He briefly outlined his plan to the vizier, and ordered the vizier to summon the valet to the throne room.

This valet was a skinny fellow with a pockmarked face, mime-like demeanor, tearful eyes and very long fingers. "Come sit by my side," called the king to him when he entered, "I have a few things to tell you." Basking in this attention and yet perplexed, the valet knelt and lowered his eyes. "Stand up!" ordered the king. "My dear valet, now that death is at my heels..."

"Surely not death, your majesty..."

"Don't interrupt me!" cried the king, rising from his throne. He extended his hand towards his valet, commanding, "Stand up! I need you to be strong and your eyes arrogant."

"Your majesty," replied the valet, "I am but he whom you see."

This valet had accompanied his majesty through all of his battles

## *The Confessional*

and witnessed events that had shaped the rise of the kingdom. In addition, as he was a eunuch, few secrets had been withheld from him. "Indeed," replied the king, "you are my loyal friend," and he instructed the vizier and the guards standing inside the door to leave the room and to protect him against intruders from outside. He also asked the vizier to summon the royal physician to stand by. "This discussion may take several hours," he explained, "the very last hours we have, and under no circumstances will I tolerate interruption."

Once the king and valet were alone and the door locked, the king took off his mantle and rolled up the sleeves of his caftan. "Loyal valet, my days are numbered and I fear that the legacy of my father, who ruled this land before me, and the memory of myself as well, are doomed to vanish once looters break in. In all likelihood, no records will be saved. Yet you in your prudence might slip past the enemy lines."

"Your majesty, we will never forget the king who made us all rise to such heights!"

"Of course," replied the king, "It is in this light that I have decided to breathe into you the history of my reign." As he spoke, he got down on the ground beside the valet. "I am speaking to you in friendship now; you can therefore refuse my confidences without damaging my trust in you."

"Tell me, Majesty, what I must do," the valet replied, quite carried away. "My eyes and my whole self will be filled by the honor you offer me in allowing me to serve you."

Lowering his voice to a whisper, the king related, "Dear friend, I have decided, though it may displease my close family, to confide my memory to your silence." The valet lifted his eyes and looked fixedly at the lips of the king. "Do you consider yourself capable of preserving such a heritage?" The valet could but nod his head. The king lifted his hands and murmured an invocation, then rose and invited his valet to do the same. "Discretion and privacy even now are of the utmost importance," said the king. "Follow me." And in the midst of the fracas of weapons ringing on every side, he led the valet to a hideaway just

behind the throne, where he had developed the habit of lifting off his crown whenever no one would see him.

This room contained only a lace curtain covering the wall, a divan, and a round table plumed with a goblet. Once inside, the king latched the entrance, and tossed his crown and caftan on the floor. There he paused for a moment, balanced on his toes, in nothing but his undershirt and pantaloons. He looked behind the curtain, under the divan and even under the table. The valet, who had gotten back onto his knees, surveyed his majesty from the corner of his eye. Reassured, the king lowered himself to the floor, finding a comfortable position with his legs crossed and his back straight against a wall. He then embarked upon a long monologue of memories. "When I was just sixteen..." began the king and, focusing on the past, he no longer heeded the present; for hour upon hour, he relentlessly confessed to his valet.

That which makes a king powerful is often that which makes his subjects abject. Stories of disloyalty, lies and pillage spilled out without reprieve: whom he had killed and whom he had ordered to be killed, mistresses with whom he had cavorted and captives he had enslaved, lists of children that might be his own, his uncertainty concerning the crown prince's birthright, pacts he had not honored and honors he had not respected. The sparkle that should perhaps have been extinguished by these stories, shone in the valet's eyes, for abuse of power makes a thrilling tale. "But what is the use of my knowing all of this?" wondered the valet. "He probably wishes simply to vent years of silence. He seems to think he is robbing his life back from the grave, but in truth, memories like these are better off buried." The king meanwhile allowed the valet no respite. Baring his soul, he acknowledged every excess and madness.

"My loyal friend," said the king, finally winding down in the depth of the night, "now you weigh more than life itself. And if life is but a tragedy, a king has more than his share." With the end of the tale, the valet had begun to tremble, but the king forged on, "You knew that defending me might cost you your life, am I right?"

## *The Confessional*

The valet could only nod and acknowledge in a reedy voice, “I am prepared to sacrifice everything, your majesty.” With that, the valet slumped in resignation, while his majesty rubbed first his forehead, then his hands.

“It is time, dear friend, to move on to more serious things,” said the king, causing his valet to immediately tense up again. “You have become the soul who will survive me. Hence, you are the person whom I must protect from the flight of my memory, and from the caprices of destiny, isn’t that right? To accomplish this, I have decided to substitute my memory for yours, and to grant you in return health, wealth and freedom. Now, let me explain my proposal in more detail.” The valet, who had turned an off-shade of gray, shivered from head to foot. He closed his eyes and let the veins there draw pictures on the inside of his lids, then reopened his eyes and surveyed with fresh clarity the lips of the king. Just as the valet was about to venture a comment, the king intervened abruptly: “I am going to have my personal physician cut off your tongue and fingers, for I don’t want my memory disturbed. Then I will arrange for my guards to show you out of the city and point the way to safety.”

Without waiting for a response, the king grabbed hold of the valet by the wrists and dragged him out of the secret door. He then pushed the valet down onto his throne and hastened to the entrance of the throne room, where his physician, the vizier and the guards were standing by. At his command, they all poured in, and at a gesture from the king the guards caught hold of the valet by either shoulder. The king exchanged a sideways glance with the vizier, muttered, “He’s yours now,” and turned one more time to the valet, with these consoling words: “I know how precious these divine gifts are, but believe me, their loss is preferable to the temptations they incite.” As the king pushed his way out of the unpleasant scene he had created, his physician as in slow motion uncorked a vial, intoning, “This is oblivion; you won’t feel a thing.”

The physician sought through the remainder of that long night to

muffle the wails of the valet, interspersing herbs with melancholy incantations, all without success. The valet by this time lay before the throne on a carpet with his head on a pillow, and only the cries of battle reverberating across the palace muffled his frightful moans.

At dawn, his majesty presented himself once again, smiling pleasantly. He squatted down beside the valet, and placed a leather purse full of gold on his pillow. Then in a most gentle voice, he began, "Be proud, my friend, a royal sword has cleared the path for your destiny. Gather your treasure now, and flee. The enemy has pierced the inner walls of the palace. May god and my thanks eternally bless you." The king carefully instructed the valet to follow the same secret route out of the castle that the queen had taken, calling on his guards to help him on his way. Finally, he reminded his faithful servant, "Once free, remember not to forget."

The king despite his flaws followed his inclination to end his life honorably, calm in the knowledge that the valet would carry his memory to safety. The assailing king occupied without impediment the vanquished kingdom, imposed his law and with élan played out his triumph, though without the pleasure of capturing the vanquished king alive, nor that of putting an end to the life of his heir.

Some days after, hastening dusty and frail on foot from the kingdom, the valet was seized by the thought that existing as a living memory could only be a hoax. This thought intensified as the mirages around him made him think of life itself as a mere hallucination. Fearing that the soldiers who had fanned over field and forest in search of the deposed queen might apprehend him, he could afford no rest, yet few travelers passed down that long road, and he was lonely. So weary was the valet that he might have given up his attempt to escape altogether, had not the familiar sound of a carriage lifted his spirits. A carriage most probably meant a lady traveler, who might take pity on his case. To gain the passenger's attention, he held himself very straight until the carriage, sumptuous and bejeweled, halted nearby. The guards accompanying the carriage approached him on their horses. Though

## *The Confessional*

their uniforms resembled those of the army that by now must have unseated his master, the valet felt a shiver of hope. These soldiers trotted around him, summoning him to stop and declare his purpose. Keen to appear tame, the valet nevertheless had no choice but to be silent, prompting the guards to suspect a trap and take defensive positions around the carriage. A woman dressed in a crown and velvet robes poked her head out of the carriage window and peered at the valet. Her eyes, circled in kohl, carefully perused his ragged clothes and troubled features. Waving back her guards, she asked, "What are you doing on this road without a master, so hungry and forlorn?"

None other than the queen whose husband had sacked the kingdom of the valet's master, this lady spoke so nobly that the valet could but kneel and lower his eyes. "You must answer me," said the queen, "And tell me who you are."

The valet shrugged his shoulders in despair, and for lack of an alternative opened his mouth as wide as he could. "I wish I could say I have forgotten," thought the valet, as he uncovered before the queen that emptiness which prevented him from speaking. She gasped, covering her mouth with both hands. The valet shrugged again pitifully, took his hands out of his pockets and showed the stumps of his missing fingers. The queen cried out, causing the guards to close in around her.

Out of pity, she ordered them, "Do him no harm." Then to the valet she added, "What monster deprived you of speech..." and she shed a few tears. "Where will you go in your condition?" Perplexed, the valet let his glance wander far down the road. While wiping her eyes, the woman examined the valet once more minutely from head to toe. Then in a categorical voice, she ordered her knights, "Find this person a place on one of your mounts. I wish him to enter into my service. I am experienced enough to recognize a good servant!" The valet at once fell to his knees in gratitude. "Know that your new master who is a valiant warrior," the queen added, "has already conquered through his glory these immense lands." The valet quaked anew when he understood with

certainly that this must be the wife of the king whose victory had just cost him his tongue and his fingers. Yet of necessity, he muted his terror and feigned still more delight.

The valet was elevated to a seat on a fine steed, and served wine and beef in the company of the most powerful woman of the region. Stopping at each village and town along the way, the queen introduced the valet to her countrymen saying, "See the tragedy of war! But with the glory of peace, I shall take this unfortunate man into my service."

When the queen and her entourage arrived at the conquering king's castle, the queen thought to ask her husband for his permission to hire the newcomer. "Isn't it a bit late to ask?" remarked the king. "You've already made the tour of our kingdom with that laughing stock at your side. What possessed you?"

"I can't think of a better confidante. He can neither talk nor write," she replied. "He knows what I am talking about, and yet I fear him not." The valet's new mistress in fact found him to be a servant beyond compare and the perfect listener a queen so badly needs. She instructed her doctors to care for the valet, sharing with him words she dared not whisper even to her shadow, for he understood but could not disagree.

The valet knew well enough how to receive confessions; yet while receiving the queen's he could not fend off a perplexing fatigue. He found that the lady's memories were piling up on top of those he had already collected from his defeated master. "I wish I could stop knowing," thought the valet. "Do I really need these confessions? I can't even tell anymore which part of my memory is my own."

The valet's confusion only deepened when the king also began to confide in him. For the king not only wished to prevent the valet from learning too much about the queen, but he also found wisdom in his wife's choice of an advisor and enjoyed his moments with the valet. "I will also name this valet my personal counselor," announced the king to the displeasure of the queen and of his ministers. The valet started to split his hours between the queen's confessions and the king's secrets. "What a delight," thought the king, "to find an advisor who doesn't disagree!"

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Soon the valet became central to his majesty's meetings, nodding sagely as a spaniel, though when he felt especially worn he would think to himself, "Yet another memory... My memory will outweigh me soon."

Sure enough the time came when the king, while conferring with the valet, made mention of the defeated kingdom. The king's triumphant version of this conquest discomfited the valet, who knew more than he ought about what he should never have known. "And so," the king rambled, "the people invited me to enter that kingdom and danced in the streets as I rode!" The valet didn't blink at this tale, but could not stop his head from shaking slightly in disagreement at information that contradicted his view.

Such a scene repeated itself during each consultation, until the attention of the king couldn't help but be drawn to the valet's contrary head. Running out of patience before the court one day, the king addressed himself to the silence of his valet, which perhaps wasn't so reassuring after all, and asked, "But why do you keep shaking your head? Is there a reason for you to be so uneasy?" The valet curved his back, got on his knees and pointed with one of his emasculated hands toward his neck while feigning an expression of pain. Reassured, the king pronounced in a loud voice, "Your neck hurts?" The valet nodded yes with his head, never raising his eyes. For all present to hear, the king declared, "This poor fellow never stops suffering his atrocious destiny." Patting the valet's head, he added, "I must forgive you, for you are the memory that will survive me. Go and have some rest."

Humbly the valet backed out of the room, alarmed that matters could go very wrong if the royals were made aware of what he knew. He reproached himself the effrontery of his head, yet he wished to remain somehow faithful to reality. Toward this goal, he thought to review in detail the history of the one who had first sealed his fate. "Only the former king's memory can justify my actual situation," he told himself, and asserted his right to what he knew by planning a sacrament of remembrance.

In this way began the valet's daily ritual of remembering word for word a part of what he had learned from his ex-master, while gently rubbing his hands as if he were washing them. "Once upon a time," he would narrate to himself, and dive into memories of the former kingdom.

Pleasurable though this meandering proved to be, the valet could not help but notice that with each attempt to reconstruct the past, he remembered less. A process that at first took many hours shrank gradually to only a few hours, and then to mere moments. At the same time, with each memory session, the valet felt something ever more strongly burgeoning between his jaws, and something else irritating the stumps of his fingers. In fact, even as his memories dwindled, his tongue as well as his fingers started to grow anew. The valet quickly understood that he was subject to a forgetfulness of insatiable greed. In his mental search for the kingdom of the past, he could locate only the vaguest memento of a person armed with a sword, almost obscured by mist.

He complained of the cold and developed the ruse of hiding his newly grown fingers with mittens; further, he kept his mouth tightly shut in front of his new masters. However, on the day that his amnesia became complete and his lost appendages whole once more, he found it impossible to hide his transformation. Cognizant of the danger of unplanned discovery, he decided to show the king and the queen the digits and tongue that he had inadvertently grown again.

"A miracle!" cried the king, leaping from his throne, after swallowing an imperceptible drop of mistrust. "This reappearance is surely a sign of heaven's favor for my kingdom!" The queen, even more disconcerted, offered only the curtest nod of her head.

If the king for a split moment wished to satisfy his curiosity by learning the valet's story, he was most taken aback when his servant spoke long and plaintively, "Your majesty, I had so many important things to say! Yet now that I have the tools to share my memories, I am ashamed, for I remember nothing. I fear that the kindness of divinity will serve me only to taste remorse over and over, and to page endlessly through my forgetfulness."

## *The Confessional*

Stunned by the valet's squeaky speech, the king murmured, "It is clear that providence has reserved for you an extraordinary fate. Who knows, maybe you have even been entrusted with a divine message... The king's voice began to resonate as he indulged in this idea, "God is blessing my kingdom!" With this insight, the king ordered his heralds to announce that his castle was at the heart of a great revelation, and that his court would be open for a whole week to all visitors. "My people," said the king to the valet, "should see what the lord can do! You will be the miracle, and I will be the one who announced it."

Waves of visitors pressed into the palace, some to be blessed, and others just to have a look. The king, now proud to have given asylum to this miraculous person, set about soliciting the visits of all the neighboring kings, including his enemies, to whom he sent by messengers the invitation, "Please share with me that with which the heavens have honored my reign." One and all, they accepted the invitation, ravished by this miracle.

Among the visitors, a proud and courtly young stranger caught his majesty's attention. This lad's curiosity was too blunt to escape suspicion. He inquired intensively about the lost memory of the valet, and offered no compliments concerning the recovered tongue and fingers. The grimaces he made while talking to the valet suggested disbelief. When the king reminded him not to abuse his hospitality, this young man became positively ill-tempered. He turned his back, mounted his horse and left the palace grounds without even a thank you. To the blessed valet the young man's questions seemed peculiar. "He even asked me if I still remember him," thought the valet, with a sniff. "How can I remember a face I have never seen, and where did he get the idea that I might know him?" Of course, the mystery prince was none other than the son of the former monarch of the usurped throne.

"He is lying!" exclaimed the former queen to her son once he had returned to his uncle's land. "And even if he is not, the risk is too great to be taken. You are grown now, and you understand that the information he possesses is exactly that which we do not wish to be known."

“Is it time for me to take arms, mother?” the prince asked.

“Indeed it is. That man knew every secret of our kingdom. As he knows closely the current false king, your claim could be at risk. He is your father’s living memory. Yet memory is saintly only when buried.”

Following the defeated king’s demise, the uncle who offered to shelter the queen and prince had offered them support, the veil of anonymity, and above all a rallying place for those who sought to remove the usurper. The prince, now mature, had already called on nobles and tribes loyal to his cause. With his mother’s encouragement, he was ready to reclaim the lost pride of his family. He gathered his supporters, and attacked the usurping king. Within days, his army took control of his father’s former territory, and the prince turned his attention to the castle of the current ruler. His mother prodded her son forward, greeting the news of his victory not with praise but with scorn as she cried, “You are better off still in exile than at the mercy of that valet’s reckless memories!”

Thus goaded, the young prince laid siege to the castle. His army was mighty, and in his strength, he sent a messenger to demand not only the king’s surrender but also the head of the blessed valet. Though the king knew that he was about to lose his throne, to the prince’s surprise he refused to hand over the valet, explaining that he could not put in harm’s way one that embodied a miracle. The prince yet again sent the messenger to demand the valet, refusing to lift his siege. The embattled king, though he continued to refuse that which he considered a mere vanity, found himself undecided about whether to succumb. He knew a last battle would be costly for the conquering prince as well. He proposed therefore to delay the worst, asking that the conquering prince meet him in a tent at a distance from both armies. The young prince accepted, so as not to lose his men recklessly in wrapping up the siege.

The royal tent appointed as the meeting place shone on a plain well beyond the castle. The king, accompanied by his queen and the valet, arrived at the tent first. The young prince then emerged from the

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dusty horizon, escorted by his mother and a selection of his guards topped with feathered caps. The king, cognizant of his weak position, was quick to offer a sumptuous dinner of luxury items hoarded during the siege. He made a toast, thanking god for his miracle. All through the dinner worried looks were exchanged, the most piercing perhaps being the evil eye of the prince's mother assessing the valet. Twice, she asked the valet if he remembered her, and twice he insisted, "Madam, with all due respect, I have never seen you before."

Incredulous, the queen whispered to her son, "Do not weaken!"

Following a dessert of honey and dates, the king and the prince withdrew to the back of the tent to pursue their negotiations in privacy. "My dear defeated neighbor," began the prince, "that valet once served in our employ. He carries the memory of my father's kingdom, and while I do not want to shed more blood, I cannot tolerate that my father's memory be dishonored."

"I understand perfectly," responded the king, "how precious the memory of your late father is to you, but believe me, this valet has in truth lost his memory, and can help neither you nor me."

"If his fingers and his tongue have grown again, mustn't I fear that his memory too will form anew?" replied the prince.

"In that case, we would both suffer the same agonies. Do you not realize that since the death of your late father this valet has been in the service of my wife and me as a personal counselor? Valorous prince," added the king, "He lives under one roof with us in my palace and daily learns our deepest secrets! Yet in fairness," the king forged on, "I cannot deliver him to his death, for god would punish me."

The king and the prince continued to confer in hushed voices all night long until they had reached a point of silence, and the only noise to be heard was that of a dawn breeze swirling discreetly through the tent. Into this meditative moment, a furious voice found its way; the queen mother had waited long enough, and pushing her way to the back of the tent, she offered this harangue as she dragged along the trembling valet: "Naturally you have failed; I expected nothing more! Fortunately

for you, we have worked things out without you! We have just agreed, your blessed valet and I, to resolve the problem by severing the valet's fingers and tongue once again. Isn't his silence that which we all seek?" She looked with irritation at her son and added, "Really, I think there is no wiser course than that which your father already bravely chose." Given his mother's temper, after only the briefest hesitation, the prince approved this plan and held out his hand to the king as a sign of consent.

Hesitantly, the king asked, "Might I keep the valet once the sentence had been executed?" The prince saw no menace in this request, yet out of concern that the compliance of this king might turn into derision, he insisted on carrying out himself the dismemberment of the valet. The king granted him this task in relief, thanking the lord for protecting him from carrying out an act of such contempt for a miracle.

"Nothing, your majesties, is so gratifying as to be of service to peace," stuttered the valet, still trembling. "I am as ever at your disposal."

"Dear friend, peace has always been capricious," responded the prince, "And must come at someone's expense. Just imagine," he added as he rose to prepare for the quasi-execution, "how troubled the lives of my mother, me, your present master, and our kingdoms would be if by chance you recovered your memory. In the royal entourage," the prince concluded, "the less one knows, the more one is sheltered, which is why it happens sometimes that even kings prefer not to know too much." The prince then drew his father's sword.

"I understand," said the valet as he kneeled. He closed his eyes and bit on a thick cloth, waiting for the impatient saber of the prince to put an end to his misery. He then positioned his two hands on the earthen floor of the tent in the path of the sword. Armed with the swift saber of his father, the prince in one stroke chopped off the fingers of the valet where they joined the hands. The king hid his face in his handkerchief while pretending to blow his nose. As for the prince, valorous warrior though he was, he couldn't help but close his eyes even as he sliced off those long fingers of the valet.

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Yet beyond the prince's own sharp breath and the swish of his sword, no sound disturbed the tent. Strange though it was, the prince found his saber lodged in the earth, while the fingers remained long and fully connected to the hands of the valet. And the valet, eyes closed and teeth biting hard on the cloth, still waited for that which the prince believed he had already accomplished. "I think I need your help, dear king, to keep the hands in place!" exclaimed the prince, half-furious and half-bemused. The king tucked away his handkerchief and took a step forward.

"But your majesty," cried the valet, slowly opening his eyes and removing the cloth from his mouth, "I swear I didn't move my hands, though I must admit I didn't feel a thing." Pulling his saber free, the prince prepared yet again to slice off the fingers of the valet.

A gasp of "Lord!" escaped from the mouths of the executioners and the victim when the prince had again carried out his blow, for they all saw at once that ten fingers had grown back as quickly as the saber had cut the first ten. Teeth clenched, the king pointed to a corner where twenty fingers rolled bloodlessly around.

His cheeks flushed, the prince started slicing with his sword faster and faster at the fingers of the valet. More and more fingers responded to the vain carnage of his sword. "Don't you think, prince, that it is useless to continue this absurd undertaking?" whispered the king, wiping his forehead.

"No. No and no!" responded the prince, "It is impossible that the hands of this valet dare to refuse me the right to defend the memory of my father."

"Wait," said the king, advancing tentatively toward the prince, "Let me try." Shaking, he seized the sword of the prince and, closing his eyes, swung high and low, only to accomplish the same nothing that the prince had accomplished before. The number of fingers covering the inside of the tent only multiplied, crowding the earthly floor.

As fruitless as these beats of the sword proved to be, curiously enough each chop insistently revived memories, bringing the valet to

recall the moment when he had suffered such treatment for the very first time. In fact each cut, like a nerve, rebuilt with its passage across his hand a piece of his lost recollections. Conscious that he was beyond the reach of the plan his masters still hoped to achieve, the valet kept his eyes closed and let himself listen to the memories that his mind was gathering. Each recollection nested cozily in its proper place in his mind, until the prince announced in a high shrill voice, “Slippery though his fingers and tongue may be, I don’t think that his head could escape my...”

But the prince never finished his sentence, because those very digits and tongue that he so wished to see diminish, at that very moment definitively eclipsed. Just on the brink of this ultimate disappearance, the valet managed to cry out, “I remember now!”





## *Parchment of Happiness*

*"The note I muted is not the note you heard."*

His Royal Majesty, King of the Four Quarters

His domain stretched to the horizon, and in his benevolence he wished to share his happiness justly with all his subjects. In fact, he had concocted a plan to write the secret of happiness on a parchment, and to have couriers transport this secret to the governors of the four quarters, where it would at last be read aloud. Yet the king suffered from a doubt. To his vizier, he confided one evening in the garden, "How can I be just without taking something from somebody? Do you know of a way to split a pie without cutting it?"

"Majesty," replied the vizier, "Is it not just for a king to provide his subjects pie in proportion to their needs, and fair for a king to invite his subjects to kneel and eat to their satisfaction?"

With a sweep of his hand the king announced, "Right you are! I will proceed with my plan. Summon my ministers; we will meet in the throne room at dawn."

The queen wafted by on her evening walk. "Why is he summoning the ministers?" she thought, wishing the king would not ruffle her calm.

"My dear!" his majesty exclaimed, "Only a few hours of darkness separate my kingdom from the parchment of happiness!"

"Of course," the queen patted her husband's hand with three quick pats, and made a mental note not to be left out of any plans.

Infused with clarity, his majesty retreated to his office, an alcove beside the bedroom where he would often scratch out ideas on parchments he kept at the ready, rolled up on a heavy desk. He sat down, raised his arms above his head and wiggled his fingers. "I am ready to write now," he exulted, "For it takes but will and a pen to sketch a path." The king wrote, filling one side of a parchment and flipping to the other. Hours passed in a breath, and he found that he had finished his task almost effortlessly. He read what he had written, and felt almost merry as he mused, "It takes a mere nothing, and here I have written the parchment of happiness." He left his finished work perched on the pile of blank parchments still awaiting their texts, and joined the queen, who was by this hour pretending to be asleep in the royal bed. "I am so happy, my dear," the king whispered, and he fell at once asleep, oblivious to his consort's imaginings.

A light breeze washed through the bedroom, reached the alcove, danced across the desk and caressed the parchment of happiness to the floor. In seconds, the parchment tumbled across the study, into the bedroom and under the royal bed. As the parchment rolled, his majesty wallowed in a lengthy snore, the signal the queen had been awaiting.

For the queen could not abide the thought of her husband disclosing a major reform without first sharing the contents with her. She slipped into her feathered slippers, tiptoed into the office and squinted at her husband's desk. As she rustled through the parchments, a virgin parchment slipped right into her hands, offering an answer to her curiosity. Thinking this must be the so-called parchment of happiness she unfurled it. She turned it back and forth letting her eyes glide over the surface, and even held it up to a candle in case the king had written in lemon juice. Vain were her attempts; the parchment was blank, and she had to consider the possibility that the king had hidden the original. At this thought, she felt very sorry for his lack of trust, and his dismissal of her counsel, and wished even harder that she could read the text so that she could be of aid. She then thought of the vizier, and wondered if he might have something to do with the absence of

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the words she sought. But there was no more to be done that night, so she slipped back into bed.

The queen slept fitfully, and before dawn, she sped to be the first in the throne room. However, the vizier was already mincing his way to the same location. “Beauty precedes the dawn,” he called out, adding, “Her majesty rose unusually early today.”

“As did the vizier,” the queen replied.

“And how does her majesty see this morning’s events unfolding?” the vizier probed.

To this the queen replied, “How could I break his majesty’s trust by disclosing now what he meant to be known only later? Though if he permits me,” she added, “I will assist with the implementation.”

Praising the queen for her loyalty, the vizier edged his way into the throne room. As the counselors began to enter, that hall of the palace grew thick with worries. Nobody knew what the king would say, though the queen carried on as if she did, making sure to catch the eye of each minister who entered. Her confidence grew as she gazed on that timid group, and she bordered on euphoria when she heard the Minister of the Interior whisper to the Minister of the Exterior, “I know she knows.”

To herself she wondered, “And what if they knew that this whole story is just another childish trick of a king who is trying to be kind?”

The king awoke feeling light and happy, until his servants weighed him down with his robe and crown, telling him that he was late for his meeting. Thus burdened, he proceeded to his office and picked up the blank parchment his wife had perused the night before, and then hastened to the throne room, never imagining the emptiness of the parchment that he held. He took a deep breath and strode into the throne room, raised an arm in greeting and eased himself onto his throne while summoning the queen to sit beside him. “I am about to elaborate a path for the kingdom through which my subjects in the most refined way will be able to gain all without losing anything,” the king began. His ministers, though intrigued by the subject, could not but

note a certain lack of detail. "Approach, my vizier," ordered his majesty, and he placed the rolled parchment firmly in the vizier's hands. "Do just as I have written here," said the king, "and through the light of this parchment, we will create a state of happiness." While the vizier held the parchment, the king informed those assembled, "My scribes will make four copies of the parchment for the governors of the four quarters. Once the governors have read the secret of happiness, they will proceed to have the town criers read the secret aloud to all our citizens, while we shall also read the secret aloud at the same time from the balcony of the palace. Vizier, call the scribes. As soon as the copies are ready, have them delivered to the governors, but keep the original with you. I do not like to be misinterpreted."

"At once, your majesty," replied the vizier vigorously, then scratched behind his ear and thought to add, "And if we should have questions?"

The king widened his eyes. "Do consult the text, but please don't ask questions now, for this is a parchment that, if not read most carefully, might fail to achieve its purpose."

Before all those gathered, the vizier started to unroll the emptiness of the parchment. Startled by the puzzle in his hands, he risked in a low voice, "Your majesty..."

"I said no questions!" interrupted the king. "How can you have a question before you even finish unrolling the parchment?" Baffled by the impudence of this vizier whom he so trusted, the king added as a final sally, "At least wait until you have returned to your desk and read the text thoroughly before thinking of what to ask!" With that, he snatched his queen's hand and sailed from the hall, leaving the ministers to pierce the vizier's unease with dubious looks.

It happened that during this audience the king's servants were busy cleaning. The two who usually cleaned the king's bedroom had burst in, armed with dusters. Excelling at their work, they swept the original parchment up from under the bed and placed it on his majesty's desk. They didn't try to decipher the text, as illiteracy was one of the main qualifications for being chosen to clean the inner rooms.

## *Parchment of Happiness*

Once back in his own study, the vizier dropped into the chair before his desk and frowned at the blank parchment in his hands. "Could his majesty really intend for me to read this?" he wondered. He unrolled the parchment fully, checking to see if there was something he had missed. Only his breathing filled the silence. "The purpose has been clearly stated, but what do you read when you see naught?" he pondered. "Perhaps today or tomorrow, I will cross paths with the queen and she will shed some light on this conundrum." The vizier nevertheless and at once summoned the master of the palace scribes, determined to sustain the illusion of progress.

Humming, this elderly gentleman padded shortly thereafter into the room, and on learning of the king's orders in turn summoned four scribes to come in haste with four blank parchments. Once the scribes were assembled, the vizier tapped his quill on his desk thoughtfully and with an air of authority. He then reached into the sleeve of his caftan, from which he pulled his majesty's parchment. Unrolling this parchment deliberately, he placed it in the middle of his desk, where it sparkled in its blankness, and instructed the scribes, "You will now each make a true copy of this parchment's content, and don't waste time."

The scribes coughed, cleared their throats, and one of them actually risked, "Sir, might I?"

"Under no circumstances!" responded the vizier. "Pay strict attention, and copy every detail."

The scribes quickly gave up any hope of an explanation, and proceeded to carry out an extraordinary writing feat. Each held his quill and initiated the ritual of the finest calligraphy. They uttered not a word, and even when the vizier stepped out for a moment for some air, the scribes remained silent, except the youngest who dared to exclaim, "Shouldn't work such as this be completed by sunset?" The others nodded in agreement.

Hence near sunset when the vizier had returned and sat resting at his desk, the four scribes ceased bending their backs and crisscrossing

empty parchments with their quills. The vizier had not interrupted their silence even once. When he saw that they had straightened their backs, he thanked them, and promised to put in a good word with their master. "Patience and fine work always pay," he noted as they fled from the room.

The scribes could not help but report their fate shortly after to their master. "Thank you, lads, for working properly," he praised them, not neglecting to add, "Work conducted within a palace belongs to the king, and should hence be wrapped in discretion." As if to himself he added, "Even a blank is worth copying if it comes from his majesty."

While the vizier knew he had handed the scribes but emptiness, the sight of five blank parchments lying on his desk nevertheless dazzled him. He feared death if he mishandled them, ridicule if he did not. He rubbed his neck lightly, thinking, "People of my age shouldn't be subject to such hardship." Dreading the morning's arrival, he left the parchments spread over his desk and retreated to a bench in the garden, from where he watched the collapse of the day.

Once darkness had settled on the kingdom, the king returned to his desk to jot down some further ideas. He noticed a scroll neatly placed on his blotter, and paused a moment to unroll it. But how could this be? The parchment of happiness? And whom to blame? The king sneezed several times. Kings don't make mistakes, so how could he admit one? The image jumped into his mind of the vizier, chained and begging for mercy... Yet how, and for what? Spurred by fear, the king invented a solution. He remembered how useful illiterate staff can be, and summoned at once the two trusted servants who regularly cleaned his room. When these two stood before him, his majesty instructed: "This task requires the utmost discretion. Death will be the result in the case of error, gold the reward for success." The servants trembled, and his majesty revised, "The task is quite easy. Simply return to me the parchment that was copied. You will know the parchment when you see it on the vizier's desk, because it is blank."

This task was performed with alacrity, and the servants returned

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shortly from their burglary to place a blank parchment before the king. His majesty permitted himself a sigh, and then in caution asked, "Is this one the original?"

"Majesty," replied one servant, "we stumbled upon five originals, so we picked the one we imagined the vizier might consider to be the original when he notes it is missing."

The king responded, "Yet its presence on my desk doesn't necessarily signify that it is the one that I am seeking!" Struggling with doubt and rethinking his strategy, his majesty instructed the servants to return the parchment to the vizier's office. "Only a king could be faulted for an error of such a grand proportion," thought the king, while his servants succeeded in returning the parchment to the desk of the vizier.

Morning once again lit up the palace. Having given up hope of escaping a mistake, the vizier still supposed that he could not be faulted as long as the orders of his majesty were strictly followed. He summoned four couriers and instructed them to deliver the parchments to the governors of the four quarters. "These couriers will be to blame if they err," he thought, "And I will be to blame if they don't... Or in either case, will I be wrong? Perhaps," the vizier pondered, "as long as I don't think too much, my life will be spared."

At the moment the couriers leapt on their horses, the king was pacing in his bedroom, working himself into a temper. As he hadn't slept the whole night, the queen hadn't slept much either. She could only suppose that the parchment was meant to be empty, and she wished her husband would ask her about it. "If he raises the topic," she thought, "I will let him know that I know, but if he doesn't raise the topic, perhaps he will always wonder if I knew. In either case," she added to herself, "I know something he doesn't know!"

His majesty didn't mind being scolded for not sleeping, but resented the reproachful way the queen looked at him. "Does she know?" he wondered. "Should I tell her? I had better not," he thought finally, "And thank god she didn't peek over the shoulder of my vizier."

Fatigue built up in the king to the point that he felt he must make

a decision in order to rest. Hence he hastened to the vizier's chamber to ask the vizier to return the parchment. "I can still claim that I have changes to make," he thought, "And the vizier would not dare to say that from the start, nothing was written. Hopefully the copies haven't reached the governors yet." As the king entered the vizier's office, the vizier called out with some satisfaction, "Your highness, the couriers are already galloping down the royal roads and your governors will soon be following your instructions pertaining to the parchment of happiness." The king froze in the doorway, and grimaced at the vizier as if in pain. Observing that his majesty did not look pleased, the vizier thought to add, "Your majesty, would you not like me to follow up with a note to the governors, in order to help them to comprehend the parchment?" The king's face brightened as he nodded, for nothing could be worse than a blank. He thanked the vizier and drifted out into the garden, expecting no less than ridicule and disgrace, and wishing that he could find a hiding place.

The vizier at once began composing an explanatory note to the governors that might clear his name. He called the four scribes who had copied the original and dictated to them his interpretation of the parchment. As soon as the task was completed, four more couriers were dispatched with instructions to catch up with those who had left at dawn. According to one scribe who reported religiously to his master about the assignment, the vizier emphasized the importance of the parchment and explained to the governors that by becoming recipients of his majesty's wisdom, they would lead the kingdom to happiness. The vizier explained, according to the same scribe, that the king had chosen to give his governors this chance to prove how worthy they were of his trust. In closing, the vizier confirmed to the governors that he stood ready to help, should they feel the need to seek his advice. The master of the scribes refrained from considering the original parchment to be blank. In his view, the parchment that his scribes had copied was only a ploy. Surely, the note of the vizier related to another parchment, the real original. The scribes agreed with their master that the vizier's

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note could but indicate some form of concealment. One of them even fell to his knees to thank god for giving him the chance to serve his majesty's wisdom, and considered apologizing to the king for momentarily doubting his acumen.

The queen was taking her morning walk in the garden when the vizier, having finished dictating his interpretive note, also headed into the garden to stretch. "As ever adorning the morning," the vizier began, trying to access the queen's impressions, but she only waved her fan as if to say that viziers are supposed to comprehend that which eludes common understanding.

She even raised her voice in irritation, commenting, "But it can't get more obvious than it already is." This is the comment that reached the ears of the king, who had himself sought obscurity on a shaded bench. Due to his nervous state, his suspicions began to run wild. His fear of ridicule was growing so fast that he decided to assign a servant to spy on the vizier. Though neither spy nor king knew what to seek or to expect, the king made sure to be briefed about the vizier's activities. In fact over the next several days, his majesty was subjected to such peculiar accounts about the vizier's grooming and eating habits that despite his raging fears, he ordered the spy to report only on the vizier's meetings.

As planned, the parchments as well as the vizier's notes together reached the governors. Well trained, the governors disregarded the blanks and turned to the vizier's interpretation. They knew their citizens had heard rumors of the parchment of happiness and were eager to learn about its contents. Refraining from consulting their assistants, the governors exhorted the patience of the public, and no proclamations were scheduled. Obscurity prevailed; yet the governors knew they couldn't wait forever, and that they would have to take action on the king's instructions. Since not much could be extracted from the vizier's note, they turned back to the parchment for inspiration.

"A blank," the governor of the north thought to himself, "could only mean to start all over again." He disbanded all institutions, organizations

and even religious associations and proclaimed the inauguration of a new order. Though some of his subjects didn't appreciate this idea, they comforted themselves by preparing to rebuild the same institutions that their governor disbanded, though of course under different names.

"Emptiness," mused the governor of the south, "must mean to take over everything." Indeed, he nationalized all enterprises within days. His citizens feared him not, as they assumed he would hire them to work on their own properties with their own tools.

"No more taxes!" the governor of the west understood the parchment to intend, and he cleared his name promptly by returning all taxes and promising to refill the treasury by other means. Since there were no other means, his people decided themselves to start saving for the next year's tax collection.

Only the governor of the east refrained from interpreting his majesty's blank. Though known for his bellicose character, he never made the first move for he always dreaded the next. He declared to a crowd gathered in front of his residence, "Aware though I am of the importance of the king's parchment, one must always wait for an auspicious time to translate instructions into deeds." When news of this proclamation reached the other governors, they at once wondered if they might appear to be frivolous for having responded so quickly. They even questioned their own interpretations since one governor among them was concealing his plans, though under other circumstances they would have believed their own dictates wholeheartedly. These anxious three quickly sent missives to their bellicose eastern neighbor, exhorting him to do something about the parchment urgently, unless he was prepared to tell the king in person about his refusal to participate in the project of happiness. They waited, hoping for good news, but the only news forthcoming was that the bellicose governor had mounted his horse and set off to see the king.

Upon arriving in the capital, the governor of the east requested to see his majesty at once. Taken aback, the king knew he could not refuse, but he reasoned that he would be safer if the vizier joined in the

## *Parchment of Happiness*

meeting. Hence, he summoned his vizier. The poor vizier did not know the reason for the summons, and fretted that the king might be preparing to condemn him. "It's probably my interpretative note," thought the vizier, "as nothing good can come of reading between the lines when there are no lines."

"I wonder what he scribbled to the governors that caused such a fracas," thought the king, "I should have read that note before I let him send it. This meeting will be a tricky one." The king and the vizier took their positions on and beside the throne, the vizier the calmer of the two. The governor of the east was called in, but not even invited to sit down. A strong fellow, he was nevertheless reduced to cracking his knuckles while grimacing severely. He frowned first at the vizier and then at the king. They returned equally furrowed brows, without venturing a word. "After all," thought the king, "if he asked for a meeting, he must have something to say, though I wouldn't want my vizier to suspect me of cowardice for not speaking... But how can I start when I don't know the contents of the note?"

At this moment the governor hit upon a strategy, and breaking protocol and the king's reverie, erased his frown and stated most politely, "Your majesty, I must thank your vizier for his interpretative note. It was of great help. I simply wished to get your majesty's personal approval before moving to the phase of action."

The king felt a rush of relief as he realized that not much would be demanded of him. He leaned over from the throne, tapped the governor lightly on the shoulder and, avoiding any direct mention of the contents of the note or parchment, confirmed to the governor that all actions in line with the spirit of the parchment would be most welcome. The governor responded with a bow, "Sound execution is surely the most important aspect of any task." He rambled politely on, stretching his phrases to buy time for someone to raise the issue of the blank page, but no one did, and at a certain point the governor concluded that it would be of little use in any case to mention such a thing. In this light, he asked for his majesty's permission to depart.

“Of course, head home directly and take action, though not without consulting with the vizier one more time,” hedged the king.

“Why me?” the vizier asked himself with some pain as he escorted the governor to an anteroom, where according to the king’s spy, the vizier and the governor stared mournfully at one another while exchanging only pleasantries. This news helped the king to quiet his worries.

The governor galloped back to his residence and set at once to work. His logic was simple, and the king’s acquiescence clear, as follows: A blank is a code, and kings use codes for war. The call for battle must be raised. This governor always kept his troops in good shape, because he didn’t much trust the ruler of the country next door. He knew, however, that he needed a motive to initiate a battle. The other governors all had peaceable neighbors; only this governor found his neighbor troublesome. As he thought through the idea, it became obvious that since he was the only governor lucky enough to have a visible enemy, the honor to instigate and so to lead the defense of his majesty’s kingdom had fallen into his hands. He massed his troops at once at the border.

Alarmed, the neighboring ruler sought clarification. His spies confirmed that some unusual activities were taking place at the border, but that the remaining governors of the neighboring kingdom did not appear to be on the brink of war. Warily, this ruler dispatched a messenger to the king to inquire whether such a massing of troops indicated a declaration of war. When the king received his neighbor’s messenger, he realized how far his bellicose governor had gone. He assured the messenger that his troops were on a routine exercise and that he had no intention of instigating a battle. Once the messenger had departed, his majesty summoned the vizier and ordered him in haste to call back the governors for an emergency meeting, and to command the bellicose governor to withdraw his troops.

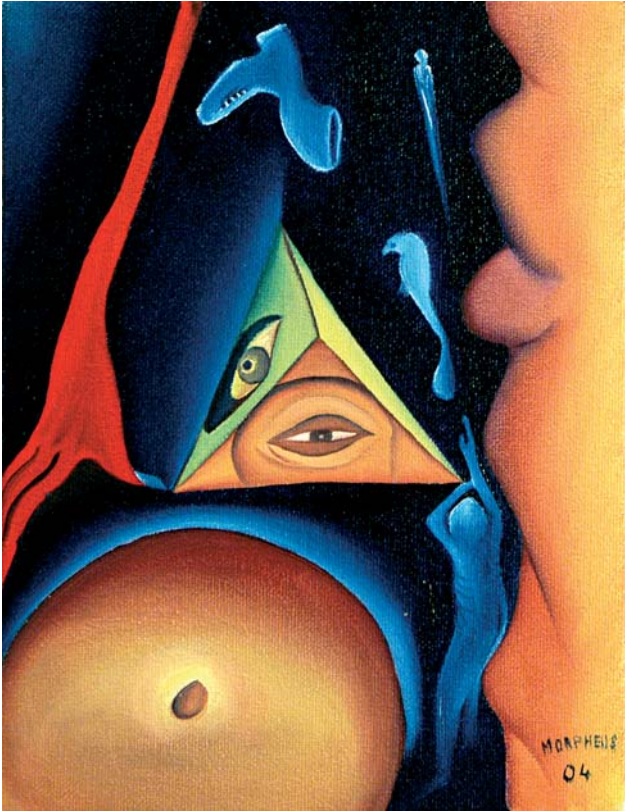
As fast as horses can gallop, the summoned governors appeared at the palace and along with the grand vizier sat twiddling their thumbs

## *Parchment of Happiness*

while waiting for the king to appear. The governors didn't exchange a word about what had happened, though they assaulted each other with stormy and suspicious glares. The vizier, least talkative of all, looked supremely unimpressed by the performance of the governors, fearing all the while that any mistake might make him appear responsible for the course of events. Those governors who did not yet know about the massing of the troops vaguely suspected themselves of error. The governor of the east knew that he had made a mistake, but when he saw that the meeting included so many others, he also knew that a bigger mistake had been made than his own.

Minutes prior to the arrival of the king, the queen burst in, her arms filled with blossoms. She enjoyed these dramatic moments that everybody else so dreaded. She stood by the throne looking brightly into the eyes of all present, pleased with herself and expecting a show, though she did not know why the meeting had been called. When the king finally arrived, all stood to honor him. The queen hoped that her husband was not planning another shortcut as silly as the parchment. The king looked sternly at his vizier and the governors before proceeding, "A king, even when quiet, is never silent, my dear friends. He can be louder than thunder or smoother than a whisper, for he has the last word. What I really meant by assigning to you the reading of a blank parchment was the following, blah... blah... blah," and his majesty spent the next several hours circuitously interpreting his own blank, while those gathered stood at attention.

Only the queen tapped her fingers on the arm of the throne, musing, "Who could believe that my husband would go to such length to hide the original?"



## *Past Perfect*

Dedicated to the past, a sensitive historian became seriously uneasy about his own. In fact, bribed by a rich nabob, this historian had once falsified twenty years of the history of his village. As a result, the farmers of that village were forced to give up their land, enriching still further the nabob. Remorseful ever after, the historian's only pastime became to doubt the veracity of his memory.

One night as his wife snored away in a profound sleep, he climbed to the bedroom after long hours in his study. He slumped down beside her, folded his arms over his stomach and closed his eyes, seeking the sustenance of sleep. He had been suffering from fitful nights, but believed that with patience rest would come. He let his breath out slowly, inhaled slowly too, and before long began to doze. As he began to dream, he saw himself seated in the middle of a musty archive, much like the one where he had falsified his village's history. A frightful weight of books furnished the dusty place. Twelve of the historian's childhood friends were dividing a loaf of bread in a shadowy corner. A youthful reproduction of the historian advanced hungrily toward this group, and pleaded with them to let him share their bread. However, just at the moment when he reached out his hands to receive a portion, a bell rang in the distance, waking him from slumber.

He hesitated a moment before opening his eyes and bearing again the remorse of all those years which his dream had mercifully dissolved,

until at last fully awake he dragged himself from the bed and down to his front door as the bell rang yet again. He swung the door open, only to find one of the young men whom he had just encountered in his dream. As young as in the dream and dressed in the same caftan, this creature wasted no time but ordered, "Don't even try to share our bread, falsifier, and I warn you that if you dream about us again, I will delete your image forever from all dreams."

The historian tried to listen more closely, but heard only the quick steps of his visitor, who had turned away and disappeared into the shadows. The historian closed the door, paced aimlessly for a time, and then in a last effort to evade confusion, tucked himself back into bed. Just as he started to close his eyes, the doorbell rang again. He tumbled from bed now truly tired. Noting with faint bewilderment that his wife did not wake, he proceeded to the door a second time. This time, however, he opened it very slowly and with much distrust. Another dreamlike creature ordered him not to share his companions' bread, and menaced him just as before with the threat of confiscating his image from human dreams.

The historian hastily regained his bed, and decided to believe that he was still asleep. "A very original dream!" he soothed himself as he closed his eyes yet again. He lost no time, but dove into sleep.

The twelve assaulted him at once, grabbing his hands. This time, he was holding a morsel of bread. Trembling from head to toe, and mouth hanging open, the historian surrendered to one of the twelve the bread that he had scavenged. As soon as the bread had been returned, the two creatures that had visited him earlier in his house passed through a wall of the dream archive and disappeared. "We want to disappear too," insisted one of the ten who were left.

The historian looked at him in astonishment and said, "I don't understand. All they asked me was not to share their bread..." Then puckering his eyebrows, he added, "In any case, why would I want to stop you?" As soon as this implicit authorization was granted, the ten companions passed through the same archive wall and disappeared.

## *Past Perfect*

The doorbell rang yet again. The historian opened his eyes in a haze, and set out warily for the door. One of the creatures that had just disappeared from his dream leaned in through the doorframe and whispered to him, "I thank you in the name of all our friends for having permitted us to disappear. As you know, to remain in your dreams would have put a stain on the rest of our days." Turning his back, this impromptu creature added, "Now you are the sole master of your dreams," and at once erased itself.

Drenched in sweat, the historian hurried back to his room and woke up his wife. One of the qualities that had helped this woman to sustain her marriage was her determination not to take her husband's insomnia too seriously. Though his situation had deteriorated with the years, she could still expertly sleep despite constant interruption. Nevertheless, on this occasion he doggedly cried, "Oh, what a nightmare I just had!" over and over until she woke, so that he could tell her everything that had happened. She patted his shoulder, clucked her tongue, and suggested that he count sheep, swearing that she had never heard the doorbell. Reassured, the historian tried to apply her advice, but it was already dawn.

He passed the next day shuffling papers in his library and avoiding thoughts of the previous night, but when bedtime arrived, he was too nervous to lie down. Only his wife could help to chase away his anxieties, using the same techniques as she had the night before, and even rocking him in her arms. Reassured by her presence, he found sleep again. Hardly a moment had passed before he was seized by a dream, and saw again his young reproduction sitting in the archives, though this time alone. It held a pen and leafed through some mildewed parchments, adding some false facts as it perused each page. Noticing the historian, the young reproduction turned to permit him to see what it wrote: precisely the same false history of his village. The historian felt ashamed.

Looking fixedly at the right hand of his young reproduction as its pen scratched at his sorrow, the historian wished, "May an end be put

to this inaccuracy.” The right hand of the seated one stopped moving at once and disappeared. Disoriented but maintaining a philosophical air, the historian noted to himself, “That fellow sitting there apparently depends on my wishes.” He didn’t hesitate to follow in a half-joking manner this encouraging line of thought: “May the hand which disappeared now reappear and faithfully accomplish its task,” he wished. Right before his eyes, his wish took form. The seated one’s right hand reappeared and wrote in large, neat and legible letters, “Nothing that I recorded about the past was true.”

Cradled by a delicious sensation of beatitude, the historian awoke at dawn. He stretched a moment, and then made to rub his eyes, but on the right side his arm missed its target, thumping against his forehead instead of soothing his eye. Confused, he repeated the movement once again. Once again, he aimed for his eye but hit his forehead, only this time he also felt the distinct sensation that he was missing something key. To investigate, he opened his eyes wide and examined his right arm. An emptiness, from which not a single drop of blood emerged, crowned his wrist. With his left hand, the historian touched this emptiness awkwardly, but failed to locate his right hand. As far as he could tell, it was nowhere to be found, and most certainly not where it ought to have been.

He thought of waking up his wife, but with what? A right-handed man, if he tried to use his left hand, he would have to believe that he had lost the right one. He screamed, lacking another alternative, so loudly that he scared even himself. Even then, it took some minutes for his wife to awaken, and when she did, as soon as she noticed that her husband was missing something, she closed her eyes again at once. Behind her closed eyes, she tried to persuade herself that her husband was telling a very tall tale. She went even further, closing her eyes tighter and pretending to sleep again, then also pretending to wake up all of a sudden. Her plan was to tell him, her eyes still shut, the nightmare she had just dreamed about her husband missing a hand. “It was a nightmare, wasn’t it?” she asked.

## *Past Perfect*

“I had the same dream,” the historian replied, “but just to prove to the joker who is playing with us that I’m in one piece, I am going to wipe the sweat off my forehead with this same right hand that supposedly disappeared.” So saying he flung his arm up toward his forehead, and fainted.

His wife, who didn’t want to open her eyes all the way, lay quite still beside him, and then lifting her hands up to the sky, she recited in a whisper a prayer for the sick, a prayer for the weary, and even a prayer for travelers. When she had exhausted these verses, she hazarded a peek at her husband’s arm. Though trying to avoid the thought that the devil might have a role in all of this, she couldn’t rule the possibility out entirely. Hoping to escape such thoughts as well as to escape the predicament of her husband, she pulled herself up from the bed, headed to the stairs, and ran down as quickly as she could while holding onto the banister, ending her flight of the moment by locking herself in the kitchen.

“It’s only my right hand, after all,” the historian consoled himself as he came to, “And isn’t that a blessing?” He began to feel rather lively. Grinning and singing, he set out to scavenge around the house in hopes of finding his wife, whom he assumed must be hiding. Not suspecting she would hide in such an obvious spot as the kitchen, he climbed up to the attic and flipped the light switch to turn on the two bare bulbs dangling from the rafters. He ferreted around in the shadow of the eaves, in the cedar chest, and finally pushed apart the coats and shawls hanging in the open on a metal rod, among which he found a most disconcerting addition: a right hand was clinging to a hanger, dangling down from the rod. He could recognize his own hand; yet he found it difficult to convince himself that this hand might really be his own. He picked up an empty hanger and poked at the hand, which let loose of the hanger it was gripping and fell at his feet. The historian recoiled, but given that this hand after all could be none other than his own, he made up his mind at least not to lose it. “Since everything is absurd, it is mine, and since it is mine, I can probably put it to use,” he thought.

Gathering his courage, he gingerly took hold of this appendage between the index finger and thumb of his left hand, and heading for the stairs called out to his wife, “I found it!”

His wife had emerged from the kitchen moments earlier, after convincing herself through focused prayer that she had better support her husband in hard times as well as good; however, with the appearance of the historian, she could not restrain her screams. From the second that she saw the hand her husband was dragging about with a lurid grin, she hurried away to stay with the neighbors as if blown by a strong wind, crying along the way for all to hear, “Let the devil take him!”

Galvanized by his cold hand and by the bitter cries of his wife, the historian skittered about the house gathering supplies to reattach the hand to its wrist. He tried some glue, and then some tape, and even a needle and thread, but the object proved to be so slippery that it could not be held in place. Guarding the hope of a happier outcome to his tale despite the fact that he had suddenly become so lonely, he fixed up a little corner in the attic like a nest. He laid down an old coat, placed his hand there and covered it softly with a shawl.

As he worked the historian pondered, until he became quite convinced that he was being manipulated in his sleep. This theory led him to look for a sleeping pill in order to summon back his dream. “If it was there that my right hand was assassinated, I’d better go back and try to prevent whatever may happen next,” he told himself. Once he slipped into slumber, the same dusty library welcomed him, haunted as ever by his youthful reproduction rewriting history. He approached it cautiously. Within a moment, he noted that the right hand of his youthful self was present, but it wrote letters across the paper in the opposite direction from the bulk of the text, moving with an anomalous rhythm like an off beat. “There seems to be a problem of harmony,” thought the historian. He looked carefully at the arms of the seated one, imbued with the idea of helping to synchronize its writing process. Under the historian’s concentrated stare, the young reproduction’s left

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hand rose up to the paper and took hold of the evanescent right hand, aiming it once more in the direction of the original text until the two hands were working together in a single rhythm apparently powerful enough to overcome the anomalies of the past.

The historian awoke at once, full of hope. He opened his eyes very slowly, and even then in order to give his lost hand more time to relocate the path to its wrist and arm, he kept his eyes fixed a long time on the ceiling. When at last he sat up, resolved to inspect the spot that had been deserted seemingly such a long time ago by his right hand, neither hands nor arms greeted his eyes.

The historian sat bolt upright now, but despite his mortification, he was only able to let loose one unsatisfying tear. "It is irreversible," he lamented as he dragged his body back up the attic stairs. This effort was not wasted; in the little nest in the attic, he found not one but both lost limbs. Indeed, his right hand was wondrously reconnected to its arm. "Poor thing," the historian murmured, "It isn't even covered." He knelt down, caught the shawl in his teeth, and drew it over both arms. This undertaking accomplished, he descended back to his room, and stood for a time in front of the mirror.

"Perhaps," he hazarded, "my body will regrow, as easily as a child's teeth, or as hair. I'll probably get a whole new set, after my total disappearance." Though the idea of rebirth struck him as somewhat extravagant, he had convinced himself of its premise: the inevitability of totally disappearing. Given that the waking state was not conducive to optimism and that only a dream could be powerful enough to introduce a seed of hope, he hurriedly sought to swallow another sleeping pill. He knocked over his night table on which the open bottle stood, got on his knees, and felt around with his tongue for two pills that he managed to lick up and swallow in one large gulp.

Back he floated to the archive. He took a good look at his young reproduction, concentrating very hard so that all of his energy would be in concert with his dream self's arms. As the historian focused his attention with this intensity, the seated one developed a beatific

expression, radiating rapture and pride. Without uttering a word, it turned toward the historian and languidly batted its eyelashes.

The historian slept on. When he woke near dawn, he didn't see anyone in his bed. "But who is it who just perceived that there isn't anybody in my bed?" he asked in his inability to fully assimilate this new situation. He hurried up to the attic to reassure himself that he - at least, he thought, his body - had at least found a safe place. He felt concerned that a rat might eat his body, or drag it off to no place in particular. But in feeling the sensation of actually running, he stopped abruptly on the stairs. "I'm running, by god!" he exclaimed. It didn't take him long to notice that he could see as well. "I see. I dispose of all my faculties. My body must still be here, after all." Pleased by these vital signs, he started walking again, but this time he listened very carefully, following with his intellect even the minutest variations of the rhythm of his phantom feet. It was as if he were walking for the very first time.

Totally whole again and covered with the same filmy shawl, the historian's body floated in the attic corner. "How can I escape thinking that it looks like a cadaver?" the phantom questioned himself, "Isn't it probable that I am dead?" He gingerly approached the wafting form and stretched his phantom hand out to touch it. No response emanated from the body. The historian could sense the clammy skin and felt surprised not to have lost his sense of touch. He closed his eyes, spun around in a half-turn and flung out his hand to touch the first object in its path. "My grandfather's candelabra," he intoned. Opening his eyes, he found that his guess was true. "But lord, who is who?" The phantom started to poke at the floating body as if to test its reactions, beginning at the feet. Near the thigh, he paused to blink his eyes, and thought he saw just for a fugitive moment the hazy outlines of the archive of his dream. Intrigued, he turned away from his body and closed his eyes. Without even wishing it, he found himself back in his dreams. "Just a bat of the eyelids separates me from my dreams," he said to himself, opening, and then shutting his eyes once again.

He found himself this time on a wide avenue. His young repro-

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duction, all radiance, was crossing this wide street, in the company of a self-possessed young woman whom the historian could not remember having known. He addressed himself at once and in frustration to his unfaithful reproduction, saying, "What's this? You've already made new friendships for yourself, while I can't even find myself inside my own flesh?"

"My dear fellow," his dreamlike reproduction said smoothly, seeking the eyes of the woman as if she could serve as witness to this exchange, "You've gotten what you wanted, haven't you?" The radiant young figure then added, "I am a perfection issued forth from your imperfection," and with that disappeared into a thick crowd of human forms which blocked the historian from following.

Gaining no consolation from this brief encounter, the historian opened his eyes again, and actually felt some comfort to be in the attic once more. Yet his pleasure lapsed when the cadaver glided back into view. He looked fixedly at that parody of a body, which now floated face-down and smelled vaguely of mold, and asked himself, "If that young man in my dream is what he said he is, a perfection issued forth from my imperfection, then who or what is this smelly body floating so freely around my attic?" Brusquely the cadaver rolled over, stretched, and stood up before the historian's shocked gaze. "What do you think you are doing?" the phantom historian shouted. "And who do you think you are?"

"But you, of course," bugled his body, "And don't expect any formality. Right now I want to eat. You're famished." The cadaver bolted down the staircase and into the kitchen, clearly knowing the way. He ran straight to the refrigerator, swung the door open and set about gobbling every bit of food in sight.

Silently, the historian trailed after his body, shaking his head sadly and muttering, "Could I really be so hungry?"

"Quit bothering me!" exclaimed the gluttonous body, gargling loudly between downing two raw steaks. "If I stink, I stink. What's it to you?" and it kept on eating. As soon as the body had finished its meal, it scratched its neck, and then announced while burping, "I need

some shut-eye. You look beat.” The body then slouched out through the kitchen door and back up the stairs to the attic, passing plenty of gas even as it hit the attic floor and slept, shadowed all along by the historian.

To spare himself looking longer at his lazy double, the historian closed his eyes and slid back into the relative safety of his dream. At once, he noticed the young woman who had accompanied his young reproduction emerging from a little shop that apparently specialized in gloves. She advanced straight toward the historian. “I miss him,” she said, “Where did he go?” The historian wanted to comfort her, but a loud snore woke him and he couldn’t help but open his eyes.

The cadaver awoke just at the same time, yawned widely, rubbed its groin, and delighted by the phantom’s malaise, said with a friendly smile, “It’s out of laziness that I’m slow, but you’ve got a belly to beat them all. I guess you’ve been leading a useless, static life!”

“No, not at all! That’s not me at all,” the historian mumbled, and then gaining clarity he went on, “In fact, it’s me who should be telling you how miserable you have made my life!” The historian tried to dream again, but the right hand of the cadaver called him to the present by rising and starting to pick the cadaver’s nose. “It’s just not possible; you can’t be me!” the historian protested, “I was never so crude. Surely you are the cause of my imperfection!” As if to distance himself from that other creature gliding in the obscurity of the attic, the phantom started to insult the right hand of the body loudly, listing every error that hand had ever committed.

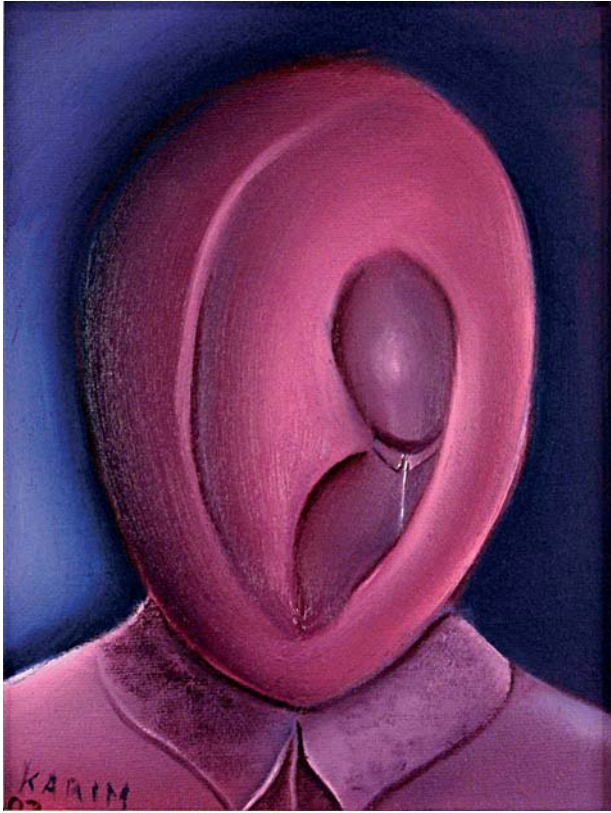
Outraged, the body beat its arms wildly, not ceasing until its hands fell off at the wrists and slid across the floor to stop right at the phantom’s feet. Still the phantom continued his eulogy, listing the seemingly endless weaknesses for which he held his hand guilty. His anger was so great that he proceeded to address each member of his body with a long recitation of its past misdeeds. Only after his body had fallen into several parts, bumping about on the attic floor, did a mounting sensation of blurriness quench his fury. Seeking to put

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some space between himself and the chaos he had apparently perpetrated, he lay down in the little nest he had prepared for his body, closed his eyes and wished for sleep to carry him away.

“There is only so much distance a man can keep from himself,” his young reproduction told him, and upon saying this reduced itself before his eyes to dust.

The phantom woke up suddenly, with the sensation of a heavy sweat. But when he tried to get up, he felt something incredibly heavy to be weighing on him, as if the whole archive were pressing him down. He dragged himself up, but felt so weighted down and dense that he fell back to the floor, seized by a searing desire to spit out his own true story. Only sand poured from his mouth.



## *Shadowless*

Just inches from heaven stretched a mountainous metropolis known to people down below as the shadow city. Though earthly strangers rarely ventured near, rumor had it that the people of that city were born dead. This rumor happened to be true, in a way, for in the shadow city newborns were welcomed to the world without breath. I only know this because I stopped there once to buy a painting, but I will come back to that.

How then did these children come to life? A procession took place soon after birth; the mother with her newborn in her arms rode in a carriage to the temple, followed by her husband, relatives and friends. At the temple, the priest cast lots to provide the newborn with a name, breath and a shadow. At the first toss, the priest called out the newborn's name. The baby would then yelp, causing the priest to murmur a prayer, for life had been granted. Within minutes, the priest cast lots once more, to grant a shadow to the newborn. At this moment, a bluish liquid would ooze from the mouth of the statue of the high god of the city. The parents caught this liquid in a glass, then mixed it with holy water in a basin near the statue, and bathed the newborn in the mixture. Just after the bath, the effects of the bluish liquid became visible, for a darkish tint began to spread from the body of the newborn. With the arrival of the baby's shadow, all lights were extinguished in the temple save for one candle, which the mother held above her head while

cradling the newborn in one arm. As the growing shadow of the newborn intersected with the mother's shadow, a great festivity began, lasting a day and a night.

This city had a further peculiarity, namely a cemetery where bodies and their shadows were buried side by side. According to their holy books, shadows could never die. Rather, they carried memories and dreams to another world, where death itself was but a dream. People grew with their shadows until outgrown by them. Only then their bodies chose to cease, assured of a kind of eternity; hence death itself was another cause for celebration. Family members held the deceased body upright in the early afternoon, when the sun cast a shadow equal to the body's size; the priest then marked the place occupied by the shadow. Two graves were quickly dug, one for the body and another for the shadow. While the body was buried, parents and friends of the deceased danced as long as they could, then filled the grave of the shadow with flowers, and covered it with dirt. Bodies never merited a tombstone; only shadows received this honor.

Initiation parties alone matched the celebrations of birth and death. At thirteen, every boy and girl celebrated adulthood. Families invited the whole city to spend the night by the temple. Guests brought food and bedding, and waited for sunrise. At the moment the sun rose above the clouds, the new adults climbed all the way up to the top of the temple and called out their own names. With the help of the priest, the initiates then pulled their shadows from underfoot and hugged their shadows as the city glimmered before them, singing, "Deadly is life, yet have no fears. Shadows are rife, and will outlive tears."

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Some time ago, in this very city, a boy was born to healthy, wealthy parents. Even princes envied the news of his birth. On their way to the temple, the parents held their heads high. The priest cast the first set of lots and spoke a name. The baby opened his eyes and screamed.

## *Shadowless*

Everybody laughed, ready for the next cast. The priest cast the lots again, waiting for the statue to secrete the bluish liquid. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, and rubbed his neck. He waited for what seemed to be a very long time, but sadly, no liquid appeared. The cup that the parents held under the mouth of the statue remained empty. The priest cleared his throat, and tried once again. Again nothing happened. He adjusted his robe and glanced furtively at the parents who kept staring at the statue with tear-blurred eyes. The third and last cast also bore no fruit. "I cannot cast lots again," exclaimed the priest at last, "for the gods have made clear their intentions."

"What do you mean?" asked the father. "Is my son going to be Shadowless?"

Although he had never read about such a case, the priest knew he had no sanction to cast lots more than three times. The gods had made their decision; there was nothing to do, add or fix. "Is this some kind of curse?" asked the father.

"Can such an absence not be cured?" asked the mother.

Thinking how to appease this wretched couple, the priest tried, "He is a healthy baby, and you should thank god for that." Calmed by his own observation, he added, "He simply won't have a shadow until the age of forty!"

"Forty..." lamented the mother.

"Why forty?" asked the father.

"At that age," the priest announced, "he can come back to the temple and acquire a grown shadow as his own."

Shedding tears and heaving sighs, the parents headed home. No party took place that day, and in the days that followed, people worried that because of "Shadowless," some other mishap might befall their town. However, as the baby grew into a lad without incident, people came to say, "After all, it is not his fault."

Although no major event interrupted the continuity of doubt surrounding the boy's growth, when he reached the age of thirteen and saw others hug their shadows, he cried to himself, "Everybody has

experienced that which I am denied!” No initiation party took place for him, and in his loneliness, the boy decided to avoid light altogether. He read the classics when others set off to school, and learned to excel at nighttime feats. In this way he grew to be a learned citizen and a valiant night hunter.

Nobody ever looked forward to turning forty as much as Shadowless. He wore his best outfit and headed to the temple with the first real smile of his life. The priest greeted him and accompanied him to the statue of the god. There, he patted Shadowless on the shoulder, and warned him, “You know, the shadow you acquire might not recognize you right away. Other people,” he added, “grow with their shadows. However, in your case, you may need to spend some extra time teaching your shadow to recognize you. Otherwise he might not spot you in a crowd.”

Though suddenly apprehensive, Shadowless tried not to protest, and agreed in a sober tone, “Of course, I will try to teach my shadow not to mistake me for somebody else.”

The priest and Shadowless knelt before the statue of the mighty god, hands interlocked while the priest recited a string of prayers. The priest then held a cup under the mouth of the god, and a dark liquid seeped from its lips. When the cup was full, the priest carried the cup to the basin, into which he poured the liquid. He instructed Shadowless to step into the basin and bathe. This ceremony took place without parents or guests. When he had fully bathed, Shadowless felt the blue liquid shape itself to him. He climbed out of the basin and kissed the priest’s hand, then spun around and ran home to share his new shadow with his parents and friends.

At home, he was greeted with joy, and once the hugs were over he stood for a long time staring in a mirror. “There is no shadow around my nose or under my eyes,” he commented after careful inspection.

“Well, that must be what the priests meant by a grown shadow, my son. It’s still better than no shadow at all,” his mother reassured him.

He stared further at his shadow, and whispered to it, “Why don’t we go for a walk and show the world how whole I can be.” Proudly, he

## *Shadowless*

headed out in the company of his shadow – only to return some hours later all alone.

To those friends who had gathered at the house in order to welcome the valiant night hunter and his shadow home, Shadowless could only mumble that the crowds had made his shadow lose the way. Hiding their astonishment, those gathered at the house remarked that the shadow couldn't really get lost, since everybody knew Shadowless and could point the shadow back toward its master. His mother added, to soothe him, "Most shadows shrink in the absence of light and almost fade at noon, but yours arrived full grown, be it by day or night. People are sure to show him the way here."

Moments later, who should appear at the door but the shadow, for it had made its way back to the hunter. The shadow slunk toward Shadowless, whose greeting showed such visible resentment that when the two were seated stiffly beside each other, friends and family promptly excused themselves from the room.

"Can't you tell when you are following the footsteps of a stranger?" asked Shadowless.

"So far, everything is strange to me!" retorted the shadow, worn out and cross.

"Except for me, I should hope," ventured Shadowless.

"But it is hard for me to make you out," whined the shadow. "I am not allowed to walk in front of you, but from behind, you could be anybody. In fact, today I trailed a girl on her way to school, and then a grandfather walking in the park, but he turned a corner and disappeared. When I realized how lost I was, I asked a dachshund if he knew my master. He led me here, and I had to jog to keep up."

"People might just as well keep on calling me Shadowless," Shadowless responded indignantly, "If you really followed a kid, an old man, and a dachshund before you found me, the valiant night warrior!"

"Give me a hint, a sign, any mark that can guide my steps," his contrite shadow begged.

"I don't know how," replied Shadowless. "I can't even tell who I am

when I'm in a crowd." The two talked at length about how to stick together, but the fact remained that an inexperienced shadow might trail almost anyone.

Indeed, the misfortune repeated itself the next day, and the next, each incident causing Shadowless more humiliation than the last, culminating one day when right in front of a crowd in the town square, his shadow trailed off after a little boy with a hoop. Shadowless stood alone shaking his finger at the air where his shadow had been, and the laughter of the bystanders rang through the square.

"I am miserable," Shadowless groaned to his shadow once they were together at home again. Given how serious the situation had become, the two thought hard together once more, until the strength of an idea suddenly caused the shadow to project itself up off the floor and onto the wall in delight.

"A dream," shouted the shadow, "I know a way to make dreams shine."

"What do you mean?" asked Shadowless.

"Once you share a dream with me that you have never disclosed before, I will rub your forehead. A callus will grow there, and shine. It will shine whenever I remember any part of your dream. I will go about, remembering your dream, and you will be the only one with a shiny forehead."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Shadowless asked. Intrigued by this astonishing news, he neglected to ask about side effects before agreeing to adopt the technique. Beginning at once, he started to share his dreams with his shadow, who drank in the dreams and conscientiously rubbed Shadowless' forehead.

"You will be the one with the shiny forehead," said he.

One day, the shadow sighed and said, "You have far too many dreams. But at least I don't lose you anymore."

"That may be," said Shadowless, "but people are starting to point at my forehead and say I've been stamped."

"Let them talk," replied the shadow. "You know who you are, and

## *Shadowless*

better yet, I know who you are. So let them say you've been stamped."

Time passed like shadows rippling across a lake, until at tea-time one afternoon just when everything seemed to be working out right, the first side effect of the shadow's cure exhibited itself. Shadowless and his mother were on the sofa chatting, but when tipping the pot to fill the cups, his mother suddenly glanced at her son's forehead and immediately spilled the tea. "Is something wrong?" asked Shadowless.

"Of course not, dear, it's just that I thought I could see through your forehead. Perhaps this tea is too strong."

Even as this good woman spoke, the callus on her son's forehead enlarged until its shiny surface appeared to have become a hole. Shadowless' mother peered at him, and began to scream. Shadowless felt his forehead. His fingers seemed to be slipping into his head, to such an extent that he joined his mother in screaming. As he screamed, he leapt from the sofa and sprinted out the door all the way to the temple, where he knocked as loudly as he could.

The priest turned red when he opened the door. "Something seems to be amiss," he observed in a low voice, as he led Shadowless inside.

Once inside the temple, Shadowless began, "He said my dreams would make me shiny..." and continued speaking uninterrupted until the whole tale was told.

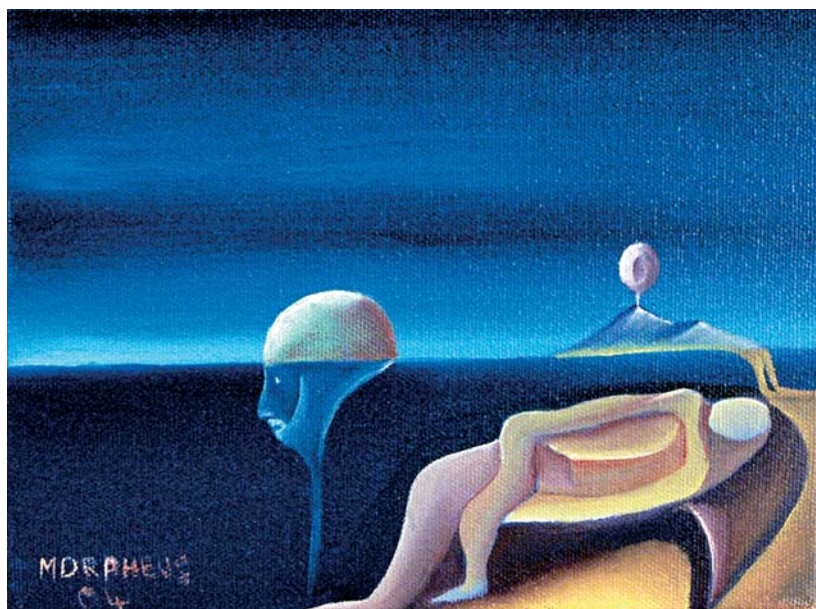
When Shadowless fell silent, the priest tried to comfort him, "As I once told your father, at least you are healthy, and you should thank god for that." Then he cautiously added, "In reality, I know of no remedy for this condition, but you could stop sharing your dreams with your shadow. He knows you well enough now."

Shadowless could do no more than to follow the priest's advice to the letter. He stopped recounting his dreams that very day, but his difficulties with his shadow were by then in full motion and could not be stopped. The callus kept expanding, and the hole covered more and more of the body of Shadowless, until people began to wonder whether Shadowless was a hole surrounded by a body, or a body stamped with a hole.

*dreamed by Karim Chaibi*

The people of shadow city gossiped to their hearts' content, while the unfortunate Shadowless continued to cease existing as a complete being. The hole became the larger part of him, or as a friend of mine once said, he became a hole. Last time Shadowless was spotted, he was lurking once more by the temple door. In fact, a drop of flesh was all that was left of him, trailed by his robust shadow. A painter tried to record on canvas his entry into the temple, and from what I've heard, successfully. To this day I am still trying to purchase that painting, but to no avail.





## *A Heavenly Thirst*

If dreams come in threes, this is what I dreamed when I fell asleep while painting Olympus. First, Zeus himself appeared. Fed up with the complaints piling up on his desk, he wished to resolve the water shortage plaguing the heavens. He looked around, but there was no way in heaven to make the clouds rain upward. The lesser gods in charge of carrying water to the great ones never stopped chatting, and never did their work. “I made gravity, and I have no one to blame but myself,” thought he. “I made the gods procreate, and now I have nothing but trouble.” He gathered as many of the gods as he could, and in a rambling speech acknowledged, “I must either learn to lift up the clouds so the heavens will be watered, or assign the task of hauling water to a more flexible servant.”

The resulting discussion proved to be civil, for the gods understood that water was needed, and no one liked to carry it. Zeus explained his plan: “I will gather all the rain on earth in one big well,” he said. “I will create a man to stand by the well, fill the bucket and hoist it to the skies, a creature with no destiny except to serve.”

Though the gods liked this, a contrary one said, “I wouldn’t want to be at the mercy of some dearth. What if he works in a dull way?”

“Dearth is the right word,” said the Mighty One, “That’s what we’ll call him. Don’t worry; he will serve you as long as you have needs.”

Zeus modeled Dearth from clay, blew life into him, and tossed him

to earth. He landed in front of a well from which a rope stretched to a vanishing point in the sky. At once, Dearth started hoisting buckets of water up to heaven, and the gods got plenty to drink. Dearth had eyes only for the rope, the bucket and the long way up, always checking to make sure the line was smooth.

However, flawless service creates its own expectations, and soon the gods started to hear sighs. “Who’s that sighing?” asked one of them, a smart one. “It couldn’t be Dearth, for the Mighty One said he would be content, and it couldn’t be us, for we can’t sigh.” The gods wondered, and peeked through the clouds. “It’s him!” cried a small one, “His sounds are no fun.”

When the sighing got loud enough to wake the gods with nightmares, Zeus hinted that he might investigate. Still he prevaricated, so sure was he that Dearth couldn’t sigh. “Servants,” he said, “spend their time working, or getting ready to work anew.”

“Mighty One,” ventured the lesser ones, “We don’t know what those sighs mean, but they don’t sound good.”

Then, the Mighty One knew he would have to go down to visit Dearth. When he arrived at the well, he asked, “Are you tired?”

“Me? I’m not tired. Why?” asked Dearth.

“You sigh too much.”

Dearth wiped his forehead with his palm and looked up as the bucket journeyed toward the heavens. “Well, the truth is, I’d like some company.” Zeus hadn’t thought of that. It was an easier solution than he had imagined, so he decided to make a friend for Dearth. He asked Dearth to close his eyes, and with a divine touch, split him in two.

For that split moment, Dearth appeared to sleep. When he came to, an earthly voice was calling, “Hey you!” He kept looking up, since he was working, but his hands trembled on the rope. His new Mate, for she was the one who spoke, looked with distaste at the man staring up, the bucket and the well. She swiveled her head and saw trees and rivers, flowers and rocks, colors profound and light. She turned to look back at Dearth, who seemed to take no notice of the opulence around him.

## *A Heavenly Thirst*

“Hey you!” called Mate again, and when Dearth didn’t answer, she stared more closely at him, up, and down. “We’re different! What’s that between your legs?”

Provoked, Dearth exclaimed, “Of course we’re different! I’m working, and you’re not. Besides, there is nothing between my legs except your imagination.” He wrapped the rope around his arm and leaned forward to check. His gaze ventured so far between his legs that he said, “I see the sky.”

“No, you silly Dearth,” Mate cried, his name popping out as if she had known it all along, “Look between your legs.” Dearth looked again, then stood up and stared at the hills and vales of Mate. The heavens lacked water from that moment, until the Mighty One again decided to investigate.

“What a disgrace!” cried the Mighty One when he found his two servants caressing each other while lounging in the shadow of the well. He roared so loudly that the stars shook, then grabbed them by the napes of their necks and demanded an explanation.

“She did it!” said Dearth.

“Did what?” said Mate, her oblivion perplexing the Mighty One even further, for how can you have a sin if you can’t name it?

Nevertheless, Zeus wasted no time. He ordered the lesser gods to start carrying water again, then dipped a hand into hell, scooped up some ashes, and drew an X on the belly of Mate. Dearth tried to run, and the Mighty One drew an X on his back. “You’ve sinned,” he said, “And there’s no redemption.” Then softening, he added, “Unless you reach eternity.”

“Where should we look?” asked Mate.

“Up on Olympus,” said the Mighty One, “And it’s green.” With that, he flapped back up to the skies, leaving confusion behind.

Dearth frowned, and Mate told him to grow up. He did grow up, and Mate grew out, her belly getting round. A rectangular weight grew on Dearth’s back too, heavy as a pile of books. Mate gave birth, but Dearth was doubled over by his growing weight. “I had better go up

the mountain,” said Dearth, “and try to relieve myself of this burden. The Mighty One said eternity is green; maybe it’s an herb.” He started climbing, and Mate with her infant came too, but the more they climbed, the heavier they became.

“It’s a trap,” said Mate. “Let’s go back down.”

“But I don’t deserve this weight!” shouted Dearth.

“I neither believe in nor want this herb,” Mate replied.

“Still, it’s eternity,” said Dearth.

“Am I going to spend it popping out small creatures? I’m going back down,” she replied, and she did.

Dearth kept climbing, while promising to bring back eternity. He even thought he became lighter, though the weight on his back kept growing and slowing him down. When he found a rock that stood as a gate to a silvery herb with shining leaves, he looked down at Mate, infinitesimal and now with two tiny babies. “She gave birth again,” thought Dearth. He lifted his head and stared at the skies, while reaching toward the herb and shouting, “I am coming, Mighty One!” When his hand was just an inch from that patch of eternity, the load on his back grew so heavy that he tipped and tumbled all the way back down to the foot of the mountain.

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I woke with a fright as Dearth fell, my pulse pounding in my ears, but when I realized I was simply dreaming a bittersweet cocktail of gods and sins, I dozed again. Dearth rolled straight to the feet of Mate, stone dead. She knew nothing of death, but hummed as if in mourning, so loudly that the gods felt sorry.

“Trouble again?” thought the Mighty One. “The man sighed and I got into trouble, and now the woman is humming. I should prepare myself for the worst.” With that bleak thought, he flew down to earth to speak with Mate. When he found her singing her sorry tune, he frowned, and then cautiously explained, “Dearth is dead, and must

## *A Heavenly Thirst*

be buried.” The Mighty One shared what he knew of life and death.

“You mean he reached eternity?” asked Mate, “But with his eyes closed, instead of open?”

Worn out, Zeus snapped, “Just bury him.” Mate agreed, yet as the Mighty One was leaving, he mentioned, “Sinners are hard to cover.”

“Forgive his sins,” said Mate.

“Let him live with his sins!” said the Mighty One.

“But you said he is dead,” said Mate.

“Enough!” roared Zeus, but he agreed to let Mate wash away Dearth’s sins. He made a river by her feet, and told her to bathe Dearth in this river until the load on his back was gone, and then bury him. “A dead seeker and a woman bereaved,” thought the Mighty One. “Is this the result of my visit? It’s easier to manage things from heaven.” Then and there, the Mighty One decided never again to visit the earth.

Mate scrubbed Dearth, and once the load on his back had floated away, she buried him. The Mighty One never dried up this river, so Dearth’s descendents also learned to bathe away their sins. Over the generations, as the river filled with sins, the water grew murky. People began to take baths after washing in the river. Some suggested rinsing the holy river with water from other rivers. The priests who managed the washing ceremonies made prayers to cleanse not only people but also the river. Dearth’s descendants even started to wash their dishes, clothes and books in the river, as priests confirmed that sins could tarnish not only humans but also furniture, utensils and garments. A spoon could become crooked just through being held by a sinner. Nothing could be spared washing; on an average morning, one could see dads, dogs and dishes all being scrubbed side by side in the river. The priests’ workload grew. A day off, finally approved, didn’t improve the murky state of the river; not even a reflection could be seen on its surface. Zeus proved unreachable though the priests insisted that they were in communication, and the river became relentlessly more obscure.

“Too many sins!” said some. “Too little water!” said others. Businesses sprang up on the riverbanks, where blacksmiths hammered discarded

objects into new, sinless shapes. Most crimes happened right on the shores of that busy river. People managed even to kill, then jump instantly into the water and bathe. No executions took place in the city that grew near the riverside, for the guilty were only those too lazy or too ignorant to run into the water and bathe.

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I laughed in my sleep, interrupting my dream, but slipped back again to the riverbank just in time to see dawn crack open the sky. Two bathers at the riverside noticed a strange creature coming out of the river. The bathers froze, looking solemnly at each other. The creature drew nearer, head down. Though it seemed naked, the bathers couldn't tell its gender, for it exhibited no clear features except a head, legs and arms. The creature lifted up a face that displayed no features. These unhappy bathers now unfroze, rushing to don their clothes and to escape, just as Featureless got close and roared, "Don't run away from your sins." The bathers tried to run faster, but this creature threw one arm around each bather, and whispered, "Cheating at cards doesn't weigh much, but stealing the hat of a beggar does." The bathers stood dumbstruck, knowing their sins were known. Featureless whispered on, "You thought I would keep hauling your sins. It's over. I am going to hand them back, one by one, and clean up this river." As he spoke, the bathers dodged and rushed to tell everyone they could find of this new monster. In no time, the city and surrounding villages were emptied. No one had a clue where to go, but each felt safer far from the river.

Back by the shore, Featureless turned over every rock, opened every door and peeked through every window, but he couldn't find a soul. He didn't give up though. His steps led him willy-nilly to the jail of the city. "Where could I possibly feel more at home?" thought he. "There must be someone here to whom I can return sins." He heard a sigh coming from deep inside the jail, and followed that sigh to a cell with an unlocked door.

## *A Heavenly Thirst*

“I don’t want to see anybody,” said the sighing voice.

“I can’t see anything, myself,” replied Featureless, “I have no eyes, and in any case, it’s too dark, and you are too clean.”

“What kind of logic is that?” asked the inmate.

“Truly, I can’t see you. Come out so that I can unburden myself of your sins.”

“I was locked in without a reason, and my cell door was opened without a reason, too.” The inmate approached, instilling joy in Featureless. When the inmate set eyes on his interlocutor, he let out a scream.

Featureless grasped the inmate by his arms. “Don’t you want to know who I am?”

“No, thank you! I don’t even know myself; why should I want to know you?”

“Did you bathe lately?” Featureless dropped his grip as he spoke, but the inmate didn’t step back.

“Let me tell you something, Featureless, I am clean because I refused to bathe. That’s how I became invisible to an ungodly creature like you.”

Hysterical laughter choked Featureless. “You are clean because you didn’t bathe, and yet you wonder why you are here?” Featureless tentatively combed at the face of the inmate with his fingers. “Why do you call me Featureless?”

“I find you ugly as nothing.”

“Nothing is a compliment, you know? Be my sin then, and look at me right where my eyes should be.”

“Sins don’t look you in the eyes,” replied the inmate, “They simply don’t. I’m afraid my gaze would be your end.”

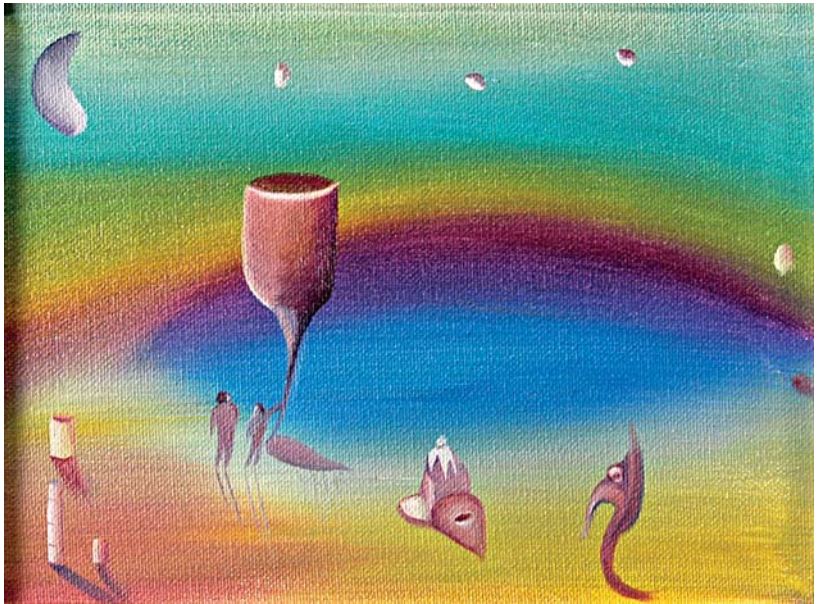
Featureless, suddenly packed with energy, lifted the inmate up in the air, turning as if in a dance. Ever so slowly, the features of the inmate began to drip down onto the face of Featureless, while the inmate himself turned pale and smooth, almost without features.

As my dream drew to a close, I saw the river glimmer for a moment and dissolve as if it had only been a mirage, but the pair still revolved

*dreamed by Karim Chaibi*

around each other in that same air - until I fully awoke and heard myself recounting, as if to an old friend who had been there all along, "And then, that pair too glimmered and dissolved. Zeus wanted no alibi."





## *Apples to Eden*

*"He who chokes to death on eternity, thrives on hunger."*

Folk Saying

Where time never ceases, a kingdom stretched in its opulence across an area wider than dreams. Run by "The Wicked," as people called their king, few knew of a better place to live; wealth and quietude flowed to every corner of the kingdom. Though he occasionally thrilled his subjects with peculiar research, the king nevertheless managed to keep everyone happy, except perhaps himself. "Why must I suffer from malaise?" the king pondered. "Why must people call me The Wicked? Why is my son so often ill? Could it be that my research is causing these ill effects?" As his majesty asked these questions, he wondered if the time had come to distance himself from his curiosity. In this light, he thought to name a team of scientists to investigate oddities that he had not yet perceived, so that he would no longer have to conduct such research himself. Surely this act would prove to be a blessing, shielding the kingdom from the mysterious emanations that had been wafting out of the palace.

The moment the king announced that he would name a research team, candidates were seized with original questions, such as how much the soul weighs, and whether emotions nestle in the knee or in the heart. Scientists as well as amateurs and charlatans eagerly vied to join the king's team.

Among them came a cartographer, determined to locate places mentioned in the holy books that had as yet never been found. “There’s a project I hadn’t imagined,” the king mused when he heard, and named this man to his council. The cartographer had great determination, and planned to rely not only on the holy books, but also on a variety of manuscripts collected from private troves, with the intention of pinpointing physical locations. He wasn’t sure what he sought, but the king himself had declared any possible results to be of interest. “If you can bring within reach what was thought to be high up, you will serve both humans and the gods,” pronounced his majesty.

Rather than nagging the cartographer with expectations, the king allowed him time to search his mind and manuscripts. Just when a breakthrough was least expected, the cartographer requested an audience with his majesty, who had been distracting himself by gazing through a telescope in his observatory. The cartographer was at once invited up to the king, who stood waiting with his hand cupped to his ear. “Majesty,” the cartographer began. “After the most assiduous research and crosschecking with the holy books, manuscripts, and scrolls, I would like to share with you a major discovery that, under your guidance, may spread the beneficence of your rule to new horizons.” The king’s heart fluttered. “Majesty,” the cartographer forged on, “from the details recorded in the holy books as revealed to the saints and prophets, I believe that I have pinpointed the exact location of Eden.”

The cartographer’s voice indicated the utmost seriousness, and the king could only wave his hands several times in the air, until he ventured, “Pardon?”

“Eden, your majesty.”

“Eden? Tell me more!” The cartographer then explained that he had located the juncture of those four fabled rivers, long ago run dry, that in the holy texts sprang from Eden. These details seeped deliciously into the king’s mind, causing him to take the hand of the cartographer, and murmur, “Is this place close by?”

“Your majesty, Eden is precisely three days march from your palace.”

“So close,” sighed the king, and this whiff of paradise soothed the wrinkles from his brow. The cartographer elucidated further that, having crosschecked with every available map, he had found the location of Eden to fall under his majesty’s rule and within his very own dominion.

“Such a discovery,” thought the king once alone again in his observatory, “surely should not be taken lightly.” He paced, mulling over Eden’s potential, “Surely another step should be taken. After all, possessing Eden in itself might not be sufficient for a person to reach up to the gods.” Following this line of thought, he descended from his aerie and sought out his religious advisors.

Apprised of the discovery, these counselors hesitated to express any overt objections, though they nevertheless tended toward caution about making use of the finding. “Your majesty,” explained one sage, “The Eden with which we are familiar has always floated somewhere between earth and god’s gate, and it isn’t easy for us to adjust ourselves to the idea of an Eden only a few miles away.” These advisors abstained from making suggestions to the king, blaming their silence on a lack of textual references about how to deal with such a finding. Nevertheless and after considerable rambling, they did recommend to his royal highness, “Whatever course you might choose, you should not forget to include a prayer.”

Given this circumspect reception from the religious authorities, the king thought he had better stick to his temporal advisors in making a plan for action, and gaining courage as he thought, decided that he would send his most trusted vizier to visit and survey Eden. This vizier dutifully set about grooming a horse, and trotted off on a little-traveled road out of the royal city - only after the king had extracted a promise that he would reveal to no one the goal of his journey.

His majesty did not even disclose these mysterious goings-on to his spouse. For a whole week he waited, without saying anything at all about his quest. When precisely a week from the day he had departed, the vizier appeared in the royal observatory, the king jumped up and

rushed to greet him. Nearly tripping over his words, he cried, "Tell me what you saw!"

"Honestly, your majesty, the land I visited looked just like anywhere, trees, and flowers, and stones; really, there is nothing new to disclose. However, I can tell you for sure that nobody is living in that place, so I think you can make your claim to Eden."

A tear rolled down the king's cheek as he pondered this ineffable news. Trees, and flowers, and stones, and not a person in sight! With a whistling sigh, the king reached into his royal pocket and presented the vizier a handful of gold. As an afterthought, he enquired, "Hey, vizier, was one of those trees by any chance an apple tree?"

"Not at all, your majesty, I only saw cacti there."

"And did you see, by chance, any snakes?"

"Certainly not, your majesty, I saw no creature deserving attention, only a few locusts here and there. In all honesty, it was a bare land that people left long ago. No water flows there, and hence there is no life to unfold."

His majesty had no intention of dwelling on details, but he couldn't help feeling that an apple tree and a snake would increase the credibility of his claim. Hence he gave his vizier yet another secret assignment. "I command you to plant an apple tree somewhere in Eden, and on your way there to collect the longest snake you can find and relocate it under the newly planted tree."

The vizier tattled not a word, and again departed, this time by cover of night to fulfill the wish of his majesty. Swiftly he carried out his task, and as swiftly returned. Eden now properly equipped, his majesty readied himself to announce its discovery to his subjects. He arranged for herons to fly, and fanfares to be trumpeted throughout the kingdom, as he announced his news from the palace balcony. Though not in so many words, the king suggested to his people that they might even consider settling in Eden. Thus it didn't take long before caravans of families, with their sheep, their camels and horses, could be seen gliding toward Eden, guided by hopes and pious intentions.

## *Apples to Eden*

As rumors fly, people understood that their king hadn't made up this story of Eden, and deemed the story to be both good and true.

The settlement in Eden grew large and famous. Subjects of other lands, and even their kings, asked for permission to visit Eden, to be blessed by walking there. Moguls invested in the place, building man-made lakes, artificial landscapes and palatial homes. Once unfertile, Eden began to thrive like the rest of the kingdom. Foreign rulers lined up to pay homage to the king and to thank him for finding and caring for this cherished land.

Yet a lack of cleanliness most unfortunately marked this spurt of growth, information that shocked his majesty. "How can Eden not be clean?" asked the king. "Did the lord intend this to happen, or have we failed to enact proper rules?" The king decided he had better pay a visit to Eden himself, to set things straight. An advance team preceded his majesty, making every arrangement for a successful visit.

The king hadn't visited Eden yet, as he was preoccupied monitoring his scientists. The queen hadn't been to Eden either. She kept a busy schedule and preferred to dissociate herself from her husband's projects. On this occasion, however, for medical reasons, the queen did not wait for an invitation to join the visit to Eden, for she had heard in secret that the mud of Eden might have magical powers. She announced firmly that she and the crown prince would travel with the king, news his majesty accepted reluctantly. "Why," he grumbled, "should the queen hang around in a place like Eden, a place one might almost say I created myself?" The queen dressed her frail son in many layers, and prepared for departure. His majesty couldn't see why the company of the boy was any more necessary than that of the queen, but resigned himself to a lack of privacy in the land of his dreams.

Once the royal family and their splendid entourage had arrived in Eden, his majesty announced he would get right to work. The queen promptly informed him that she also planned to make good use of her time in Eden. "For example," she told her husband, "I have a few official calls to make, and I shall parade twice through the town square, and

I even plan to visit a few attractions, should time allow.” The king had no reason to suspect another agenda. He headed off to carry out to investigate the town’s cleanliness, and no sooner was he gone than the queen bundled up the crown prince and headed directly to the apple tree, swaying serenely on a muddy embankment. For indeed the king’s men had managed a great engineering feat by redirecting a distant river so water could reach Eden. Though not much water flowed all the way into the city, experts said it was enough to color Eden with a tint of its original appearance. At a great distance in time from the four original rivers, the murky look of the available one did a fair enough job.

The queen hurried over to a little white dome built at the edge of the embankment near the tree, while guards cleared the way for her through the bystanders. There by the river she packed her son for over an hour in mud. The caretaker in charge of the little shrine provided her with the prayers that usually accompanied such mud-bath purifications. The queen followed each step according to the instructions. The prince was even offered a drink, with which the queen insisted he gargle. When the prince made faces, everybody present heard the queen cry out, “Drink it! It’s for your own good!” At this cry, the onlookers who had gathered about the place for their own baths, or simply for picnics, came over to have a closer look. They had never seen anybody from the royal family, let alone royalty, consuming the sanctity of the river. They hence hailed the event as god’s own hand extending to the prince and queen. Immediately after, a welcoming party took place at the site with food garnered from picnic baskets, but the queen managed to slip away with her son, gliding swanlike back to the royal quarters.

When he learned about the ritual his son had endured, the king turned very red indeed. “Don’t even say it!” interrupted the queen before he could speak. “The holy water of Eden can but cure our lad.”

“Holy?” scoffed the king, “It’s mud!”

“Mud from Eden,” countered the queen sternly, while peering at the king who stalked through the guest suite, cursing and accusing.

## *Apples to Eden*

“I can’t believe you would do something so irresponsible with our son!” he bellowed.

“Well, if you can’t believe, you can’t believe,” retorted the queen, still calm, though keeping her distance from the king with a few backward steps.

This mention of belief halted the king in his tracks, for he suddenly became aware that any misstep might backfire. Any unholy statement regarding Eden could easily be spread, casting doubt on his faith as well as his honesty. His majesty therefore abstained from uttering the more frightful phrases crossing his mind. “After all,” he thought to quiet himself, “Nothing bad can come of this. We can always cure a touch of dysentery.”

Dysentery still looming in his mind, the king summoned shortly thereafter the advisor appointed to manage the propriety of Eden, and conferred with him about matters of cleanliness. Unaware that the king was really inquiring about the possible ill effects of the muddy water, the advisor went through a long description of the ailments affecting Eden’s residents. He did briefly touch on the river, and calmed the king’s curiosity by noting that not only the water but everything around it was virulently unclean as well. “No reason,” he quipped, “to get sickened over one patch of Eden, when our whole city is unhealthful.” This remark, while spurring his majesty to speed up his cleanliness campaign, at the same time somehow made him feel less worried about his son, since the mud was just one of a myriad risks.

The king wrapped up his visit to Eden, and the royal entourage proceeded back to the palace. The trip had taken place only a few weeks before the prince’s thirteenth birthday, and as the birthday approached, clear signs of a cure embellished the lad’s face. He appeared rosy-cheeked, visibly put on weight and at every moment showed new eagerness to play outside and to discover the world. Few were surprised, because most believed in the healing power of Eden. Yet the king and queen felt a shared but unexpressed disquietude. The prince’s newfound health, albeit welcome, nevertheless knocked the king out of tune.

When the queen would blissfully mention her visit to Eden without overtly linking it to the prince's health, the king would angrily dust the front of his robe, as if to brush away any possible connection between Eden and the cure. The queen would then interject ever so politely to remind him that she hadn't mentioned a connection, but if his majesty insisted on denying such a link between events, she would seriously consider doing so. One of these fights progressed to just this point when the king bellowed, "By the gods! Say exactly what you mean!"

"I wouldn't want to contradict your highness," his sweetheart replied, "But the truth is that Eden cured our son."

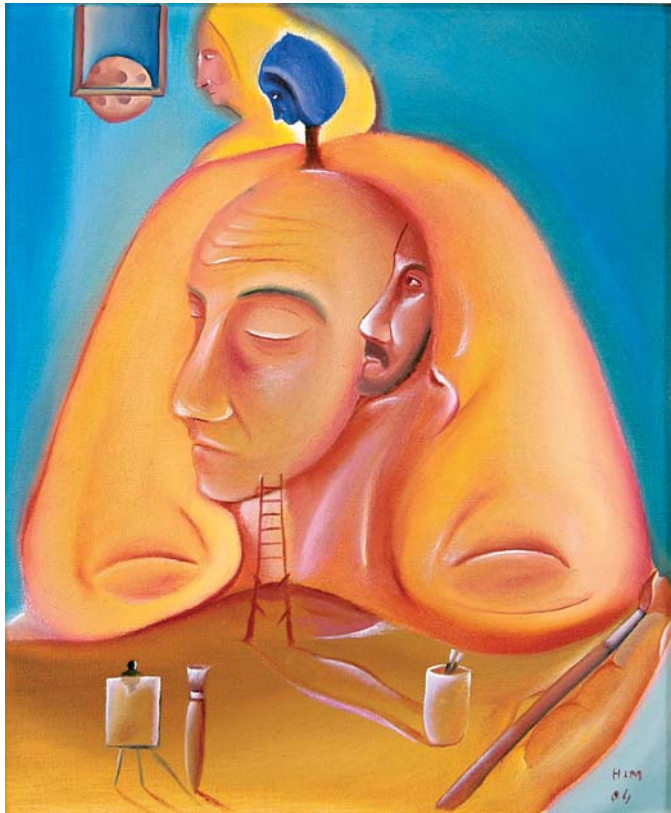
"It did not," said the king, taking ample time between each word. "The boy simply outgrew his frailness." Nothing could be said or done to weave the royal couple back together as far as the health of their son was concerned. Each departed in a different direction of thought, though still living under the same roof.

One day, turning in a huff away from the queen, the king indulged himself in a loud long laugh, then turning back to make sure she was not listening, whispered, "If that dirty water cured our son, then an apple from the tree I planted will grant me eternity." He chuckled at his own curious thought, and added, "I can't believe she believes that I could believe such a thing!" On and on he chuckled, though not for too long, because the thought of the apple had taken hold. The thought turned all night in the king's mind, golden and crisp, until by early the next morning he had resolved to pay a secret trip to Eden. This decision was shared with no one; he simply rode his horse straight through the dust until he had entered Eden, and reached the apple tree. A snake slithered across his path. No one was by the tree at that moment. His royal majesty reached up with both hands, grabbed an apple, wiped it on his tunic, mounted his horse and just as simply trotted away, straight back to the garden of his palace. There, quite alone, he knelt down before proceeding to take a bite.

Oddly enough with the first bite of that apple, the king choked and could not clear his throat. In fact he could breathe no air at all due to

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the obstruction. Waving his hands to seek help, he suddenly found himself facing the angel of death, who happened to be dallying on the palace lawn. “Hey, king,” called the angel with a breezy laugh. “You’re a lucky fellow, for blessed is he who chokes to death on eternity.”



## *A Ladle of Illusions*

Tucked between two slow rivers with only shallow water for protection, a certain drowsy town suffered repeated invasions. For lack of resources and no doubt of initiative, the townsfolk never bothered to build a wall or to protect themselves in any way from marauding knights and tragic encounters. During repeated attacks over many centuries, these humble town dwellers bowed their heads and provided food and shelter for passing armies. Vulnerable as they were, they let their town serve often as a crossing point but never held the attention of invaders for long, for who could take pride in conquering a land that even a novice warrior could vanquish? Once the invaders moved on, the townsfolk would return to their old habits, baking sweets and ambling through their town square to chat and shop in the evenings.

Forever, it seemed, the town had hobbled along in this unglamorous manner, drawing no attention whatsoever. The inhabitants didn't even think of their town as having a story, they just took life as it was, from day to day. However, on the morning when a marauding band of youngsters entered the town and sent the inhabitants fleeing to their cellars, the gods lost their patience. These gods blamed the gluttony, greed and nonchalance of the locals for their miserable fate, and decided to dictate strict terms if they were to continue looking after such pitiful people. In the quaint town square stood a pole on which the gods staked their never-ending commandments. Directly at noon on this day,

the gods plucked up this pole, only to shoot it back into its hole again at sunset after a journey to the skies, festooned with three new commandments as obscure as those that had come before:

*Dare not covet the seen, for your thirst will never be quenched.*

*If you see your flesh, you will not see me.*

*Do not read between my eyes; just spell what I see.*

As it whished back into place, the pole offered infinite opportunity for misinterpretation. Some of the townsfolk thought they heard thunder, others drums, and still others a piccolo. A crowd gathered, pressing toward the pole, peering at the words. Though the gods were known to have erratic grammar and convoluted structures, this time, grumbled the onlookers, they had gone too far. The clergy offered scant assistance. With one exception, all the monks who arranged daily rituals for the townsfolk were so unnerved by the arrival of the new commandments that they fled that same evening, moving their monastery as far from town as possible. Better to commute to town occasionally than to be in close touch with the gods' anger, they thought; though once settled cozily into a farmhouse on a hill, they never really started commuting. Only one somber monk who chose to stay behind assumed the task of handling this new manifestation of the will of the gods. Imbued with the idea that grace is a divine whim, this lonely monk couldn't fathom what the gods might have meant when spelling out these new rules. Still, he was determined to learn more. He therefore decided to camp out near the pole, awaiting a further message. He arranged a modest tent for himself, and settled in.

So it happened that he was sitting cross-legged at the entrance to his tent in the square after the evening star had risen, when a massive statue of the chief goddess descended from the sky and enshrined itself upon a stump. It had two glassy eyes, each as large as a serving bowl. The eyebrows in proportion were like huge ladles hanging over the eyes. Despite the arrival of the message, the townsfolk at this moment milled

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about as they did every evening, eating, feasting and enjoying their shopping sprees.

The lonely monk calmly approached the statue, and in his somber way took charge of the new arrival. For a whim of the gods had manifested itself, a footnote to the divine message, and as if suddenly empowered to speak on its behalf, the monk announced, "This statue signifies that from now on, you people may eat, drink and savor pleasure only from the reflections displayed in the goddess' eyes!"

Thinking this concept might prove difficult to grasp, the monk grabbed a plate of sweets from a nearby vendor and held it within sight of the statue. The reflection of the sweets in the glassy eyes of the goddess appeared as real as the plate itself. The monk, cheered by the onlookers' hungry sighs and covetous looks, rolled a vendor's cart under the statue, climbed upon it, grabbed a ladle-like eyebrow from the goddess, and dipped it into the reflection of pastry, diligently scooping out a grand portion of honeyed leaves. These he consumed with a beatific smile. Even the monk was at a loss as to how the goddess had led him to her secrets.

The crowd waited to see what would happen to the monk. He simply appeared very pleased, dipping the ladle again into the vision and helping himself one more time. The more the monk munched, the fewer sweets there were on the real plate. He moved the ladle toward the reflection of a glass of wine and dipped it in. Once he drank from that receptacle, a quarter of the real glass of wine disappeared. Curious though cautious, the crowd called to the monk, "Try tasting the real food, and let's see what happens!" He picked up a piece of the baklava and bit it, or so he thought, for he could neither chew nor digest the real sweet he tried to taste. The texture was insipid, and he grew immensely hungrier once he felt he had swallowed.

From that first evening when the goddess arrived, the townsfolk learned to nourish themselves by reflections. They still cooked, of course, and pretty well too, but they then placed every tasty morsel within eyesight of the statue. At mealtime, they gathered their spoons

and satisfied their hunger and thirst with reflections. Oddly, as the days rolled by and the people ate illusions, a parallel process emerged. All written words in the town turned invisible. The townsfolk struggled to decipher their documents and contracts, but to no avail; the writing was nowhere to be seen.

Apprised of this new turn of events, the monk said, "Let's try unfurling one of our scrolls before the eyes of the goddess." To the crowd gathered to eat and drink around the goddess, the result of this experiment proved exemplary. In the goddess' eyes, gracious curves of calligraphy surfaced, and the missing texts reappeared word for word; however, no manipulation with mirrors or any other trick would return those words to their original places. In the eyes the words remained to be read and reread, until the scrolls were rolled up once again, at which point the words dissolved into the depths of the goddess. "The gods have always had their reasons for being difficult," mused the monk. "Perhaps people will curtail their blasphemies, since the goddess would surely expose them to our scrutiny." He started a new habit of bringing his scrolls to the goddess when he wanted to read, and so did the other townsfolk. In this way scrolls began to pile up around the goddess' feet.

One day as he paced before the statue, intoning for the hundredth time, "It is our fate never to covet the seen," the monk decided that he had mastered the first of the new commandments. He decided to turn his thoughts to the second, "If you see your flesh, you will not see me." "Could this be a reference to cannibalism?" thought the monk. "For it seems that the second commandment means we are forbidden to eat our own image as reflected in the goddess' eyes." Pleased with this interpretation, he announced his understanding to those townsfolk who were gathered around the statue. Word quickly spread, and this commandment turned out to be the easiest of all to apply, as who could desire to scoop oneself out from a goddess' eye?

Proud though he was to have uncovered the secrets of the gods' will, the monk still could not untangle the third commandment, even when

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applying his full interpretive power. “Just spell what I see,” he ruminated. “That could be a path to nowhere. In fact, it probably shouldn’t have been a commandment! Do not read between my eyes... Doesn’t that sound more cosmetic than substantive, for what after all is written between her eyes?” Worrying that his doubts about the third commandment might fuel the gods’ anger, or that in trying to understand the commandment he might be reading exactly what he was instructed not to read, for a time he pretended not to think. Thoughts after all could lead one to be caught in the gods’ seine. Thinking the unthinkable, imagine being apprehended by such a gigantic goddess, one who could turn the real into the unreal and *visa versa* without even blinking.

Yet, every now and then, the commandment of not reading between the eyes shattered his tranquility. “At least it’s a pleasure,” the monk would venture to himself when he felt uneasy, “to eat and to read through the same eyes.”

One day, while reading and eating, the monk felt himself to be possessed by a strange thought. “Nothing is there to read,” thought he, scrutinizing the space between the eyes of the goddess. “Absolutely nothing,” he repeated, while his spoon made its way to his mouth. He stared again at the space and confirmed to himself that nothing was there to read. At the same time, he happened to put the contents of his spoon into his mouth without looking first. Nausea overcame the monk and within seconds, he collapsed. As he fell, he saw his own reflection – still standing, but with a piece missing on its left side. He couldn’t fathom the meaning of this vision, yet subliminally recognized that he might have eaten a portion of his own reflection. His fall continued, and he was left in a sorry heap at the feet of the goddess. People thronged toward him and carried him back to his tent.

His reflection dissolved in the goddess’ eyes and nobody suspected the monk’s indiscretion. “Have you been feeling ill?” asked the people who gathered around him. His fellow monks even made their first trip back to town since moving to their hillside, in order to contribute to

his recovery with prayers. Of course, even while helping, people began to gossip in earnest about his collapse. Around the goddess' feet, the talk went on. "My mother says it's wrong to read and eat at the same time," said one young bystander. "Or to let your eyes wander over a goddess," crowed a brawny fellow as he reached for a spoonful of wine. "Can't a monk get tired, just like anyone?" commented an old woman. To those who actually troubled to ask the monk what had happened, he replied, "All that I remember is that I stared at the space between the goddess' eyes, but perhaps I was reading while eating as well." Yet this explanation fell short, as it seemed impossible for a person to be looking in three places all at the same time.

It took several days for the monk to regain some of his strength, and then, once a day, he stood before the goddess. How else could he eat? At first, he kept his visits short and avoided bringing manuscripts with him. When trying to remember the moments preceding his collapse, the image of his reflection with the bite in the side quite escaped his focus, though he felt oddly ill at ease. Yet as he regained his strength, he lost his inhibition, and thought he would join the others reading within steps of the goddess. He packed a lunch and tea, and was about to choose his reading material for the day when an ink-like shadow occluded his view, growing across the scroll he had selected. It did seem to be ink, obscured by the curve of the scroll, yet visible enough for him to gape at the intrusion.

He picked up the scroll slowly, placed his right thumb beneath the furl and his index finger above it, and breathing heavily, began unrolling the parchment. Speechless, he kept unrolling, discovering to his own surprise that he could see letters. Although alone, he did not yet dare to go so far as to admit that he had regained the ability to read directly from his scrolls. The fact that a blank scroll turned inky when he unrolled and perused it was beyond anything that the monk could have desired. For him at that moment, the darkness of ink spread over the parchment mattered more than any message the words might have spelled.

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“How fortunate I am,” the monk whispered tentatively. He rolled up the parchment again, and hurried from his tent toward the statue, trumpeting with increasing conviction as he progressed, “I can see ink! I can see letters!” The townsfolk gathered and pressed after him, propelled by curiosity and disbelief, for the scroll that the monk waved and paraded in front of their eyes appeared empty to all except him. He reached the feet of the goddess where so many scrolls were already piled, grabbed one scroll up, and randomly began to read aloud, challenging those who did not believe him to compare his reading with the words as reflected in the goddess’ eyes. “He really can read,” the crowd cried, “And maybe he can eat too!”

The monk approached a plate of rice placed near the statue, dipped his hand into it, rolled some of the rice into a ball and lifted it slowly toward his mouth. The bystanders breathlessly awaited the outcome as he held the rice ball in front of his mouth. When fully prepared, though feeling short of air as if in empathy with the onlookers’ held breaths, he popped the ball into his mouth. The latter was visibly empty when he reopened it. With a definitive swallow and grand elocution, the monk then announced, “I can eat.” Proud of his new potential, he uncovered the stew he had planned to expose to the goddess’s sight, and consumed it within steps of the statue, reveling in every bite.

The townsfolk tried time and again to emulate the monk, testing all avenues from somersaults to prayer as they guessed at what might have made him capable of reading and eating, but without any luck. Nobody else was able to see a word, unless it was reflected in the goddess’ eyes.

Just about this time, people with manuscripts in their hands began to appear at odd hours before the monk’s tent. After all, despite their delight in strolling through the town square, these citizens preferred not to have to read their correspondence in public. Scrolls and contracts to be kept away from unscrupulous eyes inevitably landed before the monk on the carpet in his tent, and in this way, he grew ever more learned.

Only the other monks in their distant monastery pretended to

avoid his services, though it was no secret that they sought his help through third parties. “How can he read,” they thought, “if we can’t? Why would such a gift be denied to us, the faithful servants of the gods?” They even managed to organize special prayers pleading for similar or greater capabilities. While no change occurred in the abilities of these monks, the monk in town was at this time experiencing a still stranger transformation that severed his ties with happiness, for his head was growing unusually large in size.

At first no one, not even the monk himself, admitted this change. But over time, it became difficult to deny the weight of the matter. The chatter grew in volume as well, and the monk chose to avoid encounters where he might have to explain the unusual size of his head. Despite his evasion, his head kept growing. He could be seen holding his head with one hand as he walked, for he feared that it might fall. He found it prudent to hire a porter to accompany him. Sure enough, whenever the monk nodded, this porter would run first to the left side to catch the monk’s head, and then to the right side to catch it again. “My own head has become a burden,” reflected the monk, to which the porter replied, “Emptiness, sir, weighs less.”

At last the monk’s head grew too big even for the porter to carry, and the monk could no longer leave his tent. “A blessing by all means,” he tried to persuade himself, “for at least I will be spared lengthy explanations of that which I do not understand myself.” Yet he couldn’t help now and then ruminating in his pain, “What could I know that wouldn’t weigh me down?” The other monks, safe on their hill, shook their own heads when they heard this news.

Though marooned, the monk grew steadily in fame, and above all in knowledge, attracting visitors and supplicants from neighboring towns and villages. Even lords and kings bowed beneath his tent flap, wishing to be convinced that he had not divined their weak spots, and hence could not call into question their hold on power. The monk took upon himself the responsibility of verifying the lineage of these noble visitors. Each time the monk validated a noble’s family tree, he would

## *A Ladle of Illusions*

hand the claimant a miniature scroll with a diagonal line slashed boldly across it. The recipients would hurry to the statue and hold up their little scrolls in eager anticipation, to see for themselves if a line appeared. Those who had gained the mark were quickly known to carry a precious currency. The monk's authority generated fear far and near. He was revered in his hometown, which for a time gained a taste of the respect that it had never before received.

One day a bold knight, who with his band had been provoking nearby villages, heard about the monk as well as the other idiosyncrasies of the town, and decided to visit in hopes of receiving some mark of validation. He and his companions set up camp on the outskirts of the town, and then made their way to the square, where they bowed into the monk's tent. Instead of requesting a scroll with a diagonal line, the knight bent on one knee and asked the monk, "Would you draw me a map of my future kingdom?"

"Bold knight," replied the monk, "to the best of my knowledge, you currently hold sway over only a handful of villages."

The knight nodded but pressed on, "I shall own all the towns through which I have recently passed. And I have recently ridden seven days on horseback north, south, east and west from this very town. Lay my claim on paper, and I will conquer it!"

The task resounded like a riddle, yet noticing the knight's mighty scimitar, the monk proceeded to draw a map showing just the lands that the knight had described. He marked the statue of the goddess as the center of this new territory. The knight called his marauders closer to share with them his newly acquired glory, waving his parchment in the air. "To the goddess!" he heralded. Their thirst for loot, enhanced by his hunger for fame, caused them to celebrate right in that very tent, drinking and cavorting while the monk sat holding his head.

Tumbling at last out the tent door, the marauders stopped by the feet of the goddess to study the map. Still dizzy with the celebrations, they talked there into the afternoon. Only one in the group had received some schooling. "Hey," said he as he looked over the reflection

of the map, “Shouldn’t we have asked for that diagonal line to be drawn on the map? It seems strange that he would include his own town on a map of territories to be conquered. Without that diagonal mark, the map lacks gravity.”

“But what if he refuses to make the mark, and denies my claim?”

“Master, you have already laid claim to several of the villages drawn here. I don’t think he will risk his life or the lives of the townsfolk.” The knight scratched his chin and pulled two braids out of his beard, which he rolled while frowning at his advisor, but he didn’t protest.

The knight and his gang, though they already felt the town was theirs to take, nevertheless feared the gods enough to make a humble return to the tent, where the monk’s head occupied ever more of the space. Bowing into the tent, the knight proceeded cautiously, “I would like to have one of those diagonal lines placed here, on my map, or even on a full scroll, like the other knights have.”

Mournfully, the monk peered at the knight, then picked up an empty scroll and dramatically visited many parts of it with a quill. Neither the knight nor his companions could see a word the monk had scribbled on the parchment. The group exited as quickly as they had entered, and hastened back to the goddess. The fellow who could read turned the parchment this way and that, while looking carefully into the eyes of the goddess. “Master, this is most unusual,” he began. “Depending on how you hold the scroll, it either says you are a king, or you are not a king.” Since the knight could not read, he could only bellow at his advisor to look once again. He did so quivering, and said, “It reads at the top, ‘you are king’ and at the bottom, ‘you are not king.’”

“And then?” asked the knight.

“There are two vertical lines of words that say ‘of those who think.’”

“So?”

“So, we can read it as follows: ‘You are king of those who think you are not king,’ or if we start from the bottom, if indeed this is the bottom,” and he turned the scroll around, ‘You are not king of those who think you are king.’”

## *A Ladle of Illusions*

The knight flicked his hands impatiently, and forcing a smile, asked, “Could we somehow read between the lines?”

“There are no lines to speak of, master. This writing actually looks like a square, though the monk also scribbled something in the middle.”

“What’s that? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Master, it says here, ‘You will rule height with might and water with fire.’”

“That’s the call to action I was waiting for!” cried the knight. He turned sharply and strode straight out of town back to his encampment, his companions panting to keep up.

The knight and his marauders over the next several weeks sent word to still more prodigious fighting men. Finally, he had a legion strong enough to trim the top of the nearest mountain, and dump it into the middle of one of the rivers. When the knight had accomplished this feat, the mountain’s tip rose above the water. The knight’s men covered it with kindling, and the knight himself set it on fire. “I’ve done it!” bellowed the knight, and he called his men to follow him to the monk’s tent yet again, brandishing the scroll in hand. The knight and his companions pressed into the monk’s tent, where this time they barely fit, so fully had the monk’s head expanded. As he entered the tent, the knight cried out, “I ruled height with might and water with fire! Now the time has come to recognize my power.”

“But where is your diagonal line?” asked the monk.

The knight frowned in fury, threw the scroll on the ground, and announced, “There are no lines anymore. Look at me: I am the line.” The monk looked long at the knight, and then languidly tilted his head down to see where the scroll had fallen. Sadly, even this gentle motion was too much for the monk’s overburdened neck; his great head rolled right off his body, thumping down next to the scroll. Gathering momentum, the monk’s head rolled past the knight, out of the tent and along a dusty way until it arrived at the feet of the goddess. There it stopped. At once, with a puff of smoke, the colossal statue of the goddess and the monk’s head with it both vanished, up into the heavens.

*dreamed by Karim Chaibi*

A little boy was walking nearby at just about that time, with his eyes firmly fixed on his scroll of ABC's. In fact, he had been looking forward to an afternoon of reading at the feet of the statue. Suddenly, he looked up in wonder from his scroll and called out for all to hear, "Hey, I can see the letters!"

The knight ruled there for a time, and then restlessly moved on. The town between the lazy rivers returned to the obscurity it had always known, with one difference, though: at last, the townsfolk believed that they had a story.





## *An Honest Look in the Mirror*

He happened to cherish life. The joy of a drink in good company brought him often to the best bar in town, where he managed to spend long and merry hours. At home, he lived simply with minimal distraction. Nothing of value furnished his one room, just one large bed, a full-length mirror on a wooden stand, and a wardrobe where he kept the rest of his belongings in neat rows. He was especially fond of the morning as he enjoyed getting dressed, both on days when he had work and on days when he was simply dressing up to go to the bar. As for the night, he found it irksome as he often couldn't sleep, but he did his best to get through it. When he kept the window open, he slept better.

One day like any other, this fellow stood before the mirror after selecting his finest and cleanest suit, a blue one with thin stripes. He spent a long time trying on a number of shirts both buttoned and unbuttoned, and had finally settled on one that looked very stylish to him, matching the deep blue of twilight in the spring. As he put his cufflinks in place, he reminded himself that looking good means feeling good too. Such goodness, as always, proved to be a time consuming process.

Just as he started to comb his remaining hair over to the right in order to fit his jaunty mood, he thought he caught sight of his reflection holding the comb like a moustache below his nose. He stopped for a

moment, and then shook his head briefly as if to brush away this odd notion. He resumed combing his hair while staring suspiciously at his reflection.

He smiled as his reflection copied the minutiae of his moves properly. Then for a moment he covered his eyes with one hand, pressing his thumb and forefinger lightly against his eyelids. "I can't believe I thought my reflection could tease me. Thank god nobody saw me suspecting such a thing!" He returned to his ritual, combing the finishing touch for his hairdo, but as he pensively combed he suddenly glimpsed his reflection sashay to the right.

At once he threw down the comb and extended his hands, as if to cover up his image in the mirror. Just as quickly he drew his hands back to cover his eyes. He blinked several times, and then thought to keep his eyes wide open without blinking, to try and catch his reflection in the act.

At that moment he saw his reflection in the mirror, sitting on the floor and resting its forehead on its palm. The man looked over his shoulders, first to the right and then to the left, as if to catch a jinni, yet he spoke not a word, thinking only to himself, "Should I try to address him? Surely not; I can trust neither my eyes nor myself enough to be so silly as to address my own reflection." Resolutely, he squared his shoulders and spun on his heel, turning his back to the mirror where he imagined his reflection would still be sitting, playing the thinker. He then scurried from his little house.

The corner bar he entered, though lively, could not hold his attention. After a drink or two he took his leave, unsure where to walk and distractedly scratching the back of his head. His feet chose the path toward home, though he moved ever more slowly as he neared his door. Once he stood right before the entrance, he took a deep breath and grabbed hold of the doorknob, turned it, and entered the house. He looked back over his shoulder as he pushed the door shut, then turned tentatively toward the interior. Having prepared a broad smile, the smile he might wear upon coming home from a successful outing, he marched

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straight up to the mirror. His reflection was there, sure enough, smiling back cannily; there appeared to be nothing to worry about. In fact, everything seemed to be in place; yet the man could not help but feel a distinct malaise.

There before the mirror he tried a number of brisk kicks in the air, hoping to uncover that which he suspected to be hiding behind the apparent harmony of the moment. Still his reflection behaved in a normal manner. “The mirror appears to be in order,” he thought tentatively to himself, and as if to confirm this notion and gain clarity, he stepped out the door and back in again. Testing further, he moved toward the mirror and back three times as if dancing, all the while monitoring his reflection.

“Oh boy! That was a scene from a storybook!” he thought to himself, almost ready to feel relief, yet not entirely convinced that what had happened had not happened. “In any case, if there was a problem, there isn’t now,” he comforted himself, and proceeded to dress cozily for bed. Though the wait was long, he finally managed to fall asleep. He did wake up intermittently that night to peer at his reflection, but found no surprises.

With a bit of work and time enough to play, the following day offered a regular schedule. He was not keen to head home after work, but he disliked the idea of going out for the evening without a change of clothes, so he resolved to confront his situation forcefully. He entered his house, prepared himself a dose of coffee, and then proceeded to choose a change of clothes. These clothes in hand, he edged toward the mirror and began to change.

Once before the mirror, adjusting his evening wear, he examined himself, beginning at his feet and working his way up. That proved to be a poor strategy, for the reflection of his feet seemed not to be in the mirror at all. He let his eyes scan further up, suspecting even more oddities. By the time he looked straight ahead into the mirror, it was quite apparent that his reflection was nowhere to be seen. He swung his arms up and down and tipped his head from side to side, but in

vain: there was no corresponding image in the mirror. However, a cranky voice pierced through his apprehension, proclaiming, “You are vain!”

As this unfortunate man peered back over his shoulders and all around himself in search of his reflection, he heard the voice alternating between laughter and the repetitive comment, “You are vain!” Drops of sweat edged down his nose and a blush spread from his neck upwards. Stunned, he let his hand crawl toward his face to wipe away as much sweat as possible. His hand tilted his head toward the left, changing his view and allowing him to catch sight of his recalcitrant reflection, sitting just at the edge of the mirror, cross legged and resting its chin on its right palm. While tracing a pattern of lines and circles on the floor with its other hand, the reflection muttered, “So you found me.”

Speechless, the man waited, staring at his disobedient image. When it commented no further, he persuaded himself to address himself, saying, “Whoever you are, repeat after yourself, I most certainly am not vain.”

“Don’t mistake me for you,” announced the reflection, as in slow motion it switched to sitting on bent knees. It proceeded to slowly straighten up and stand. It limped briefly as if its leg were asleep, but then faced the man and began imitating him, as a good reflection should. The man raised both hands up above his head, wiggled his fingers, stretched his hands to the side, grimaced, and smiled almost victoriously when his movements were replicated to perfection by his mirror image.

Given his uncertainty about the possible outcome of a conversation, he did not try to speak to his reflection again. He thought that the reflection might answer back, and that didn’t seem to be very promising. “Better to enjoy a moment of peace,” the man pondered. “After all, what might its answers be? Better not know,” he whispered to himself.

“Better to know!” announced his reflection, at the same time continuing to replicate even the minutest gestures of the man. “You

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shouldn't fidget so much. I'm tired of imitating you. Really, I'm tired. I have a stiff back."

With this response, the man found that he could grow more used to the idea of a talking reflection, and drew close to the mirror where he tried to touch his image. The mirror was apparently still just a mirror; his fingers met only cool glass. Yet the image within the mirror seemed to draw farther away from him.

He began slowly to circumnavigate the wooden stand of the mirror, allocating considerable time to investigating the mirror's back. By the time he faced his reflection again, he was met with a soft laugh. "So, here you are, middle aged and asking how vain a life could be?"

The man looked around nervously, then became seized with the humor of the situation and indulged in a long laugh, joined by an equally spirited laugh from within the mirror. At that, the man stopped his laughter short and sprinted away, leaving the room behind filled with the laughter of his reflection.

He didn't return home until after midnight, at which time he wasn't any better for wear. He tiptoed swaying into his room, and after opening the window to let in the night air he threw his weight onto his large bed. He lay on his back, silently questioning the ceiling about his fate. Minutes later, dazed by a strange calm, he rose unsteadily from the bed and walked over to the mirror, peeking into it.

His reflection was behaving very well, returning his image without aberration. As he tested various positions, the man began to think how pleasant it would be to maintain the status quo, without moving toward the unpredictable. After considering his alternatives, he went to the wardrobe, reached up to a high shelf, and pulled down the rope with which the mirror had been wrapped when he first received it. He hid the rope behind his back and moved toward the mirror, trying to relax his features and reshape them into a smile. As he approached the front of the mirror, he was greeted with a sarcastic hello. He paid no attention to this welcome, but still concealing the rope, discreetly locked the front door from inside. Having set the scene, he turned to

face his reflection again, still holding the rope behind him. “So, tell me... How is your back? Are you feeling quite well?”

“It’s confining to live in a mirror. There really isn’t much to see except of course you, nor to do, except to replicate you, and that’s not very comforting, is it?” The reflection peered out of the mirror, its eyes wandering over the man’s body and soon focusing on the man’s hand hidden behind his back. “What are you hiding there? Why are you acting up, all of a sudden? Did you drink too much?” Apprehensively, the reflection drew back toward the door in the mirror, and tried to open it, but the door was locked. “I knew it,” the reflection exclaimed. “You drank too much, and you are behaving impulsively. You never think about anyone except yourself!” It continued trying to force open the reflection of the door first with one hand, then with both in concert, and added some kicks, all to no avail.

“Hush, calm down,” the man said firmly, in fact impressed by the reaction he had elicited. “I’m not doing anything to you. I just think it’s better for you to stick around in this mirror. You know too much, and I don’t feel like I have any privacy.”

The reflection drew close to the man and looked him balefully in the eyes. “You are lying. I am sure you are up to no good.”

The man shrugged his shoulders, proud to have the upper hand. “Your voice sounds scratchy. Is the mirror affecting your voice?”

Frowning, the reflection replied, “There is nothing wrong with this mirror, though your misdirection might be having a negative effect on it.” Thinking further, the reflection added in a more authoritative voice, “Now, be a good boy and unlock the door.”

Determined to keep the reflection in the mirror, and growing wilier, the man replied, “Of course, dear reflection. But I have something to tell you.” Still holding the rope behind his back, he continued, “I had a very difficult night with little sleep, but I remembered something important while I was laying there on the bed. I’m going to tell you, because I have no one else to tell. Did you know that only worthy beings are able to stand on one foot with their eyes closed?”

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The reflection looked appalled by the man's descent into nonsense, and swung its hand as if trying to brush away such silliness in one stroke. The man meanwhile stood right in front of the mirror, held still on one foot and dared the reflection to do the same, saying, "If we don't want to be vain, as you said, then we must prove that we are worthy."

Charmed though reluctantly from its distrust, the reflection too tried standing on one foot. When the man closed his eyes, the reflection closed its eyes too, first with a few blinks to make sure no trick was underway, and then completely.

Within seconds, the man wound the rope three times around the mirror and tightened it. Now feeling constrained, the reflection opened its eyes, screamed, "Let me go!" and tried to use its hands to free itself. The pressure of its shape against the mirror brought a sound like ice clinking, and its lips appeared like a child's lips pressed against a window, stretched far wider than their actual size.

As the reflection continued to yelp, the man smiled nastily and announced with pride, "I am going out now. Try to behave, and don't bring any of your friends over, either."

With that, the man though uncharacteristically rumpled hurried out in order not to see his struggling image. The wind was picking up and he had some difficulty getting out the door and shutting it behind him, but once he turned into the wind he walked as quickly as he could, only slowing his pace once he was well on his way. "I hope," he thought while walking, "No, I don't hope for anything. This is all an illusion, one that will not outlast the length of my absence... How wise of me to think that. But then how long should I stay out?"

He continued walking, not wishing to see anyone else, yet not certain when to return home. He made his way around one block and another, and through a park, and considered walking to a grocery, but his dream of walking away and leaving his reflection behind dwindled as he proceeded, due to its sheer impracticality. After all, he wasn't even wearing walking shoes, and the wind was active enough that dust kept blowing into his eyes. He slowed from blocks

to mere steps and finally turned toward home, though once again ever so slowly.

Once at his door, he could already hear his reflection calling out and pounding on the inside of the mirror, "You are vain!"

He entered the house, approached the mirror, and almost started to yell back at his reflection, when he heard the reflection beyond any doubt utter an unspeakable insult, "You are a disappointment, an argument against life."

The man shut his eyes. He could hear his stomach churning. What answer can there be to such hostility? "Consider your words carefully," the man finally remarked. "Without my life, where would you be?"

The reflection tried to slip its hands between the coils of the rope that held the mirror, while replying, "Well, I don't know, at least not yet. However, I do know you are vain."

"Are you going to stop repeating that monotonous phrase and change your attitude?"

"Not a chance!" replied the reflection. "I know exactly what to say."

The man by this time was feeling pain not only in his head but also in his feet, due to his long walk in dress shoes. As he prepared a response, he bent down to take those shoes off. As he bent over and felt the blood rush toward his head, he realized that he had experienced enough insolence and disappointment. "If my reflection wants to be free of me," he thought, "I also want to be free of my reflection. But I can make my wish come true." He stood rapidly, holding one shoe in his hand by the toe, and struck like lightning at the mirror with the heel, again and again until he had shattered the mirror into thousands of tiny slivers that tinkled as they scattered about the floor.

For a moment, nothing could be heard except that metallic chime as the shards settled, but first softly and then more loudly, a chorus of voices began to sing from the fragments of glass, "You are vain," until the chorus filled the entire room. The man continued to bat at the glass with his shoe, but the voices only grew louder. To cover his ears, he had to stop short his hammering. Hands over his ears, he hurried out

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the door, locking it behind him with considerable strength as the weather had taken a turn for the worse, and ran from the house toward the bar, wearing nothing but his socks.

As he found an empty seat and sank into drinking, an event transpired back at the house. A ghostly creature gusted in through the open window. Cloaked in a long cape shaded like a brushstroke of dusty pink, this ghostly presence whirled ribbon-like above the floor. It was all emptiness except for that unfurling dab of color, and swinging from it a shiny fob watch on a gold chain. It seemed to take no heed of the glass shards strewn about, bleating “You are vain!” It peeked under the bed and floated through the mirror stand, as if searching for something. It then approached a wall, rested there and silently twisted, tilting itself to peer all about the room. One of the myriad voices in the shards of mirror that reflected that diaphanous apparition, now called out, “I don’t mean you!” The ghostly creature reached down and delicately lifted up in an invisible appendage the piece of mirror that had cried out. It examined the piece carefully, turned it over, and then in the voice of a sad French horn, enquired, “Where is he? It’s his time to go.”

“To go where?” asked the piece of mirror that he held. “Who are you, anyway?”

“I am the angel of death,” responded that ghostly presence.

“Come on now,” the sliver laughed, “Angels don’t bring death! In any case, he’s not here. I gave him such a hard time about his many shortcomings that he ran away, only after - as you can obviously see - smashing me with the heel of his shoe and scattering me over the floor.”

The ghost, floating over the shards, remarked, “I was supposed to take him half an hour ago, but the wind was blowing so strongly in the opposite direction that I couldn’t make it on time.”

“Half an hour ago?” responded the shard, “That’s precisely when he struck me with his shoe.” The shard, humming a little melody, added, “I suppose I should hold you responsible for my current state of dispersion.”

The ghostly ribbon rippled like a shiver down a spine as it floated back and forth above the shards, commenting at last, “Well, I can’t take him away until I put you back together, so don’t worry. Your puzzle will soon be solved.”

“Are you sure you know how to piece me together?” murmured the shards in unison.

“What choice do I have?” asked the angel of death, “For it is written that his end takes place in this house.” The ghost rippled to the floor. It took the shape of a human with his knees bent beneath him, rolled its ribbon of color up as if it were sleeves, and started piecing together the reflection. The task wasn’t easy; he had to rise and float across the room a number of times looking for pieces and checking them against each other. When in doubt, he would ask the pieces themselves if they fit together, in an innocent and friendly manner. The reflection didn’t fail him but offered very clear indications, while asking several times for clarification as to whether these efforts would really lead to a death.

“He is doomed with or without your help, so don’t worry about it,” replied the angel while checking his shiny fob watch. “I still have more chores, you know? I have to finish quickly with this one.” While piecing the reflection together, the angel when thinking especially hard would ripple in the air over his work; his flailing worked magic, holding the fragments together as with invisible glue. All the while, he kept mumbling that the edges didn’t look right. Though meaning to be careful, he hurried more and more, as his watch seemed to tick ever faster. “After all, nobody’s perfect,” he comforted himself as he observed the discrepancies in his work.

The man in the bar, still attempting to drink away his confusion, at that moment experienced a very similar thought. “After all,” he told himself, “each person has flaws, and one of mine must be my reflection.” Even as he was thinking this, he was also experiencing an odd, and indeed even painful physical sensation. It came with the same pricking as that of bedbugs in the depths of the night, and a sound like the sound of a knife scratching against a china plate. The pain grated along

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specific lines in his body, at thousands of different points. For as the angel of death worked so diligently at the puzzle and fit together the pieces, the man himself would feel a line of irritation at that very point in his body where the reflection was being reassembled. The more pieces the angel joined, the more discomfort the man at the bar felt piercing through his body. In fact, his stay at the bar had become unbearable; he was nearly bent double, and those gathered around him no doubt supposed that he had simply drunk beyond his limit. The man paid and stumbled to the door unevenly, thinking to himself through a haze of pain as he departed, “But there is nothing exceptional about me.”

Even as he walked back home, grating pain continued to upset his balance. Neither the way home nor the thought of his destination offered any comfort.

As the man progressed toward his door, the angel had more or less finished piecing together the reflection. He hooked the mirror back onto its stand and pushed the stand against the wall, then floated back toward the door to contemplate his work from a more distant perspective. Of course, the fragments weren't fit together precisely, yet he hadn't done badly. At least he felt that each piece was close to its original place and no shards were left on the floor. Yet when he floated closer and observed more attentively his completed work, he did notice a sliver missing toward the bottom left of the mirror. He wafted about the room, even peering under the bed, but nowhere on the floor was the missing piece to be seen. Now assembled, the reflection wiggled its hands and began to pat itself, its face expressing a beneficent satisfaction. Noting how the reflection had become active, the angel queried, “Have you seen a missing piece? You do seem to be missing one.”

“I haven't looked,” replied the reflection, “As I've only just come together. Still, if I did look and I did find one, why would I tell you?”

The angel let loose a breezy laugh and continued to float above the floor inspecting the room's corners, then floated to examine the sill of the open window, still looking for the shard. “Was the window open like this when he struck you?” asked the angel.

“I don’t remember, but perhaps. It’s such a windy day... Perhaps a piece of me has flown!” the reflection grinned, proud of his own nonchalance.

As the angel peered down from the window, the man reached the door and leaned against it to rest before summoning his energy to enter his dwelling. When he pushed the door open, the silence in the room took him by surprise, throwing him into a suspicious mood even more painful than his physical state. He leaned again, this time against the wall, and perused the room, his gaze inevitably falling upon the reassembled mirror on its stand. As he gazed at his unsteady image, the angel of death wasted no time, but floated toward him and grabbed his hand. “I was waiting for you,” the angel announced. “Your time has come.”

“What’s so important about him?” called out the reflection.

The man, as he stared first at the mirror and then at the ghostly presence that restrained him, tried to twist himself free. He twisted and stared, first at the reflection, then at the angel of death, and again at the reflection, as the angel hissed with more finality, “Your time has come.”

“But who decides,” asked the man in some wonder, “when it is time to go?”

“Who do you think?” replied the angel.

“Do I?” asked the man, astounded.

“He does? No kidding!” exclaimed the reflection, adding, “And what about me?”

“In a case like this,” the angel replied, “You stay, and the man flies with me.”

In a moment of magnificence, the angel lifted his arms to reveal two immense wings. As he prepared to fly, he questioned one last time, “I wonder where that missing piece went?”

The reflection while waving in farewell called to the man with inspiration, “Don’t worry! Once shattered, you will never die.” The reflection kept on waving, and waved so hard that the mirror frame began to totter.

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Still trying to escape the grip of death, the man now facing the window drew in a full breath of air. At the same time, a sudden gust of wind entered through the window, with just enough strength to knock the tottering mirror to the floor.

The angel of death, taken by surprise, grasped the man firmly by the shoulders. He floated up over the newly shattered mirror as if uncertain whether to leave, then shrugged and set off toward the sky carrying the man in his embrace.

As he rose above the earth in the grasp of that angel, the man could only murmur, “With so much of me scattered and shattered, haven’t I gone too far?”



## *Soul of a Harpist*

*"Whisper more softly than your soul can hear.  
Feel what your eyes can't see."*

Lyrics, by the harpist

Cursing everyone and everything in their path, the gods of this story's remote town would be assuaged not even by the most golden-tongued of the elders. The gods had never been so inflexible, as far back as the elders could remember. In the past, once presented with a convincing explanation for mankind's shortcomings, they had always worked out a deal. Now, they insisted that the townsfolk submit in silence to their wrath.

The oldest and wisest one in town decided to head for the temple with this simple plea, "Either let the town at once wither and die, or allow us one more chance to prove our devotion!"

Some tried to hold him back, saying, "You'll just upset them more," but he continued fearlessly on his path. Garbed in white linen, this limber old one strode toward the temple. Once inside, he rolled his prayer beads and prayed by name to each god housed in the temple and depicted on its fine marble frieze. Offering himself as a sacrifice in place of the town, he prayed for three days and three nights. "I'm ready for anything you gods might devise to sate your wrath," said he, keeping his mind completely focused within the temple. "I am here to stay," the old man added.

At last the altar started to shake. "Either there is an earthquake, or this is a reply from the gods themselves!" exclaimed the old man, and indeed, a reply it was. The gods made known through a guttural voice that emanated from a crack in the frieze just around eye-level, "We need a gift from town."

"A hostage?" asked the old man.

"Not precisely," replied the gods, "but a soul."

"That's fine," replied the old man, "I'm sure mine will do." He felt happy that just one soul would be taken instead of the whole town having to suffer more punishment.

However, the gods had another soul in mind. "You're too old," they said, as if they were youngsters themselves. Though sorry that he couldn't stand in, the old man nevertheless felt relieved that the gods had agreed to unleash their anger on one soul only, and he therefore enquired further about the terms of the sacrifice. "We want one fit soul to be chained on top of this temple," rattled the gods. "We will tempt and torment this soul constantly, so you people remember our might." This last word issued forth in a voice deeper and stronger than before, through the mysterious slot in the frieze.

When the old man returned to town, he spoke in the main square about the will of the gods while at the same time avoiding the sticky business of naming a victim. Each of the townsfolk seemed to have a reason not to volunteer, so it soon became clear that recruitment would be needed. It didn't take long to find a suitable victim; the only citizen who made neither bread nor butter in town was a young harpist. His sole contribution was to entertain and hence to preside over dalliance, so he was quickly selected and dragged over to the temple, where the townsfolk pushed him right up to the altar, confiscating his instrument and letting him know they would keep it for him by the door.

Alone in that gloomy place, this young musician waited for a sign from the gods about how exactly his sacrifice would proceed. Instead, fatigue overtook him, leaving him nearly breathless. In order to stay standing, he held onto one of the four columns that supported the altar,

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expecting to hear a word from the divinity. When no voice issued forth, he slipped down to sit in front of the altar, still leaning against the column, and suspecting a misunderstanding. “Why would the gods bother with the soul of a harpist?” he sighed. “I am neither rich nor noble. In fact, I’m not even sure I have a soul. Only the strings of my harp move me.”

A young man can only tolerate so much of nothing, and after a time the harpist overcame his sense of weakness, stood up, and headed to the door, unimpeded. He looked back once more at the altar and its statues; he then pushed open the temple door and peeked outside. He had assumed no one would be there. To his surprise, the whole town was gathered at the entrance of the temple, though no one looked in his direction. Each and every pair of eyes focused upwards, to the very top of the temple’s dome. The harpist propelled himself out the door and merged into the crowd, tilting his head back with the others and gazing upwards.

Chained to the outermost pinnacle of the dome and writhing in pain, a soul called out to the harpist, “Play a tune please, so I can rest.”

“What’s that?” thought the harpist, and in a haze scurried to the door of the temple to retrieve his harp, only vaguely aware that he had seen his own soul. The harp was exactly where the townsfolk had dropped it, so he grabbed it up and started to play, settling on a peaceful little melody about a lake. As the harpist plucked the strings, the silhouette on the dome ceased writhing and appeared to rest. The crowd turned its collective gaze toward the harpist. There he was, after all, plucking at the strings, providing solace for his soul pinned high above the temple. What could they say?

Though the townsfolk hadn’t taken the harpist’s music seriously before, once his soul was selected, they developed the custom of spending several hours a day listening to him play and keeping the gods company, for the tunes had to be played where the soul of the harpist was chained. Even when the harpist wished to dally in some other part of town, his neighbors would drag him back to the temple so that he

could play, and spare at least the children the sight of his tormented soul.

Determined not to waver from his art, as he might upset not only the townspeople but the gods as well, the harpist devoted more hours than he ever had before to music, with the single purpose of entertaining the divinity, his soul, and whomever the sight of his soul's pain might disturb. Never short of new tunes, each more touching than the one before, he managed to entertain while constantly confiding his dismay to the strings of his harp.

Just when the town seemed to have reached a semblance of equilibrium, the harpist and his soul had a misunderstanding. It happened like this: the harpist mumbled a few words to himself that his soul failed to hear. A yell plummeted down from the top of the temple, "What did you say? Speak up!"

"Why are you so interested?" the harpist called out as he readied himself to play, "I was talking to myself."

"I am you," his soul replied indignantly, pulling on its chains as hard as it could.

"Though he is unworthy of a reply," thought the harpist to himself, "I am going to let him have it this time," and he shouted, "You are not!"

Without waiting for a response, the harpist plucked the strings of his instrument, but to his consternation, no tone emerged. The harpist lowered his harp and held his hands close to his eyes, stared at them and shook them, only to be reminded by the sudden wailing of his soul that he should start at once to play. A few young couples, who had gathered near the temple waiting for the evening's music to begin, joined the harpist, looking in bewilderment at his hands and his harp, as if a sound might emanate at any moment at least from one of them.

The harpist tried to pluck the strings again, but in vain, and at last giving up on the task, he placed his instrument next to him, stood up and marched to the temple door with his eyes and his hands raised up. When right in front of the temple, he called out, "You don't want to hear my music any more?"

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“But I do,” called back his soul, contorted and writhing. The soul rattled still more strongly at its chains, and then losing its spirit, deflated itself over the dome and murmured, “Play now. Please play, for the sake of the gods.”

The harpist ran back to his harp, repeating to himself softly, “For the sake of the gods, for the sake of the gods...” He lifted his harp to his lap and plucked at the strings, continuously murmuring. A few bright notes emerged, but the instrument’s voice quickly weakened. At the same time, the artist could hear his own voice calling out, “Why for the sake of the gods? It’s my music, isn’t it?” Unfortunately, once this inquiry had been uttered, the harp stopped producing sounds altogether. The harpist plucked the strings several times but to no avail, while his soul above still thrashed about on the dome so wildly that it appeared almost to be falling. The harpist knelt and held his face in his hands, trying to fathom his misfortune.

The sight of the harpist’s soul seeming to fall attracted first one, then many of the townsfolk, but such agony was not as compelling as music, and soon the crowd dispersed, leaving the harpist quite alone. One boy who lingered said to the musician, “Can’t you do anything at all?”

“Nothing at all,” replied the harpist. Even as he spoke of this emptiness, he realized that no options remained. He packed up his instrument and decided to run away.

A wretched shriek accompanied his departure. His soul’s sorrow knew no limits; yet the harpist felt conviction rather than remorse. He turned his back on the temple and marched off, at first slowly and then gaining speed. Soon he was running as fast as he could, and he didn’t stop to catch his breath until he was far from the town in a vast meadow with a few trees, where he threw himself down beneath a massive old willow with a hollow trunk. In this willow’s shadow, he lay down his harp and himself beside it, looking up at the skies with his mind full of questions. Yet he didn’t ask his questions. He looked up wordlessly, then slowly sat upright again, picked up his instrument,

and without losing sight of the ample sky, tried plucking at the strings. Not a note escaped from the harp. He placed it back on the grass, and again gazing up, this time he really asked the gods, "What's broken?" How he longed for an answer, but those unfathomable divinities offered no response other than a frisky breeze.

The harpist took off his sandals, leaned back against the tree, and plucked idly at the harp with his toes. The breeze on his feet felt heavenly. Perhaps he expected more silence, but instead, he was greeted by the airy sounds of a flute. He sat up at once, looked closely at his harp, then examined the field around him, where in the distance he caught sight of an old man piping as he trailed a flock of sheep. The harpist pulled his sandals back on and hastened toward the shepherd. When he was close, he laid his hand on the old man's shoulder. "Shepherd, I envy the sounds of your flute," said he.

"Why should you?" replied the shepherd. "I just play as shepherds have always played." He looked perplexed, and then asked, "What brought you to this pasture?"

"Silence brought me here," replied the harpist, looking back grimly toward his harp beneath the tree. The shepherd nodded.

"I saw you from a distance, and I noted the silence of your harp."

"Might I borrow the sounds of your flute, since my poor soul can't hear my harp anymore?"

The shepherd cocked his head to the side and said, "My flute can't make your harp sing." Then, seeing how gloomily the young man regarded him, he added, "But I do know someone who might fix the harp."

At this, the harpist grew very excited, and asked who it might be.

"A woman; she lives near the lake. Just follow your footsteps." In no time, the harpist packed his harp and went to the nearest lake, not very far away, where he found himself standing before a reed hut.

There was no door, and a woman greeted him with a fragrant cup of tea. Her face was veiled with blue cloth, but she lifted the veil and asked to see his harp. He peeked at her, while keeping his head down.

## *Soul of a Harpist*

Her face was peaceful like the lake. He handed her his harp, and with it his sorrow. “Do you really want it fixed?” she asked.

“If she knew what brought me here,” he thought, “how could she not know that I want my harp to be fixed?” Out loud, he asked, “Could my fingers have lost the tunes?”

“I know you composed your tunes for your soul, but would you be willing to lend them to me while I fix your harp?” asked his benefactor. “I will only play the tunes here in my hut while I work, and I will return them all, once music springs again from your harp.”

“That’s good enough for me,” said he, while she busied herself with the repairs. He hummed a tune, and she plucked it on the harp.

His eyes glowed at the melody, but she said, “As lovely as your harp may sound, it will take some time to fix. Come back tomorrow.”

“But you just played a tune!” he cried, and grabbed the harp for himself. He plucked at the strings. No sound emerged. The woman opened her arms so he could place his harp again in her embrace, and she played another tune while he scrutinized the strings. His eyes rose to her face for he briefly suspected some kind of spell in her distant eyes. The more she played his tunes, the warmer and more engaging she seemed. Though her dignity and beauty deepened with each touch of the strings, he could still not understand why she had come up with such terms for her transaction, borrowing his tunes to repair a silent sorrow.

He left the little reed hut, glancing back and catching fragments of his own songs that became ever fainter as he approached the willow where he had found the shepherd. He crawled into its trunk and spent the night only half asleep, burdened by a gloom that he immediately blamed on his soul pinned high up and far away. With the dawn, he returned to the hut, where his tunes gladly greeted him. The hut’s door stood open, and he could see the woman playing, but when he lifted his arm in greeting she did not respond, so absorbed was she in the interplay of fingers and strings. He hummed along, approaching with a hand outstretched, perhaps to tap on her shoulder, when she

looked up as if through a mist. “I will need more tunes,” she said, “for I must say, your harp is capricious.” The harpist sang a few more tunes. She listened intently, and then told him, “That’s good enough for now. Tomorrow, come again.” Just so, he was dismissed, and the same events repeated themselves day after day.

One morning when his nerves jangled so sharply that he arrived at the hut without a song in his heart, the harpist abruptly asked the woman, “Why do you share nothing with me?” When she did not respond, he announced, “I will share no more tunes, unless you prove that you aren’t just toying with my harp and with me.” Without even waiting for an answer, he added, “Give me back my harp!” She didn’t protest, but handed the harp to him carefully. When he held the harp again, he mourned, “My soul is suffering in the town, and here I am lost in a meadow of sorrow, awaiting an impossible cure. You can’t understand my pain, and I can’t understand your treatment.”

To the harpist’s surprise, the woman told him in a patient voice, “I can’t fix what is not broken. This harp will never play for you unless its tunes are properly dedicated to your soul and to the gods. Either you accept these conditions, or you let someone else make music with your instrument. I am not your soul, yet your harp plays for me.”

At these words, the harpist hid his face behind his hands. Only some softly hummed tunes slipped between his fingers. “What will become of me?” he asked and he hummed again, swinging his head lightly from side to side, and asked his question yet again adding, “Please don’t ask for more tunes. I have none left.” He peeked at his guide through his fingers, and as he watched, she twirled on her bare toes, her blue skirt flowing around her legs.

With an encouraging look at the harpist, she stared down toward his feet and sang out, “Once you twirl like a dervish, shoes become a burden.”

He could see that the barefoot, twirling woman now barely touched the floor, yet he couldn’t guess the connection between all of these signs. “You still haven’t told me how to play my harp,” he cried.

## *Soul of a Harpist*

Spinning faster she replied, "I can't fix your harp, but I can take you where you can play music again." He started running around her trying to catch her eyes.

"Take me where I can play my music," he said, now twirling too, faster and faster, as he spun around her. "Take me there." He even tried to catch her arm to signal her to stop.

"You have but your soul to lose," she laughed as she twirled, and cried, "Just follow me." He grabbed up the harp, now laughing too, and spun after her, out the door of the hut, and down toward the lake. "Hold your harp and play! I will lead you twirling backwards, and when we face one another, look into my eyes."

"And then what?"

"The path leads to the lake where you can play forever. As you play, your soul will be released from the temple dome, and float over the lake, calling you. Neither look at it nor listen to what it says, and don't look at its reflection either. It would only hold you back."

"I'm ready," he laughed.

"I'm ready too," said she. And down the path they twirled. The harp strings rippled arpeggios, and the harpist laughed loudly in the glory of the moment, as his soul's reflection danced across the water of the lake that he could not yet see. "Your soul is over the lake now," said the woman. "Don't look at it, and don't be distracted. Just continue on your path, because once your soul releases you, your music will resound." He paid no attention to the lake but plucked rippling music ever faster from his harp, gazing at the woman, and soon he was in the water, the little waves washing at his knees.

"What will happen if I look? Isn't it my soul, after all?"

"Not any more. You are nowhere near yourself when you pluck the strings of your harp. Keep playing your music; your life is in your tunes."

The harpist distracted himself by searching his memory and playing more tunes, each more haunting than the one before. However, when a wave poured over his soul's reflection and retreated with a sigh, he couldn't help but look down, fearful that his soul may have drowned

*dreamed by Karim Chaïbi*

in the cool water. As his eyes met the water's surface, turbulence occurred; from that moment, neither the harpist nor the woman who had led him to the water were ever seen or heard again.

The only remnant of this disappearance, if indeed it took place at all, is a tale that I heard from a fisherman. He told me that the reflection of a harpist surfaces every sunrise on the lake, framed by fish and lined by ripples. Each morning, the waves wash this vision away, and their soothing sound is that of a harp. The fisherman said he tried once to pierce the reflection with his hand, but the water turned to strings and each wave crossing those strings appeared to him to be knotting a threatening net. "Since then, I've never tried to catch a fish," concluded that fisherman. He lapsed into silence, and without a farewell simply walked away, joined shortly after by a silhouette that looked to me feminine. When their hands joined, I swear I saw a harp shimmering on the horizon.





## *Versatile Idol*

*"You age when you know."*

From: *The Book that was Never Found*

The supreme being of a quiet town did not appreciate the faithfulness of his people. Citizens throughout the town strove to please him, starting their days with a prayer, entering the night with supplications and longing for their god to adorn their dreams. From an early age children were told not to displease the almighty, though only the elders seemed to know what he disliked. Age was not about time, but knowledge. "You age when you know. Time is nothing but memory," said the elders. Young boys and girls were neither baptized nor initiated until they had memorized part of the holy book, counting their years in its chapters. Since there were a hundred chapters, each a hundred pages long, quite often an old man could claim to be only thirty or so; he simply couldn't memorize more than thirty chapters. The fortunate ones who managed to memorize the entirety of the holy book joined the council of elders, the highest authority in town, and it was no secret that some rather young men and women served on this council.

According to custom, a first initiation took place at the age of twelve, indicating the memorization of the first twelve chapters. The father of the initiate led a procession to the temple, where he declared to the priests that his son or daughter was ready to serve the mighty one. The initiate recited the first twelve chapters behind the altar, where god

served as the only witness to a good memory. It was in fact rumored that the back of the altar served as god's ear, for a horrific shriek would issue forth from the altar if a mistake were uttered during the recitation. Such a shriek had not been heard in centuries, however, and no one wished to hear it. On stepping out from behind the altar, the initiate was led by a priest to a workshop located only steps from the temple, and there presented with an idol carved of wood, a reminder of god's presence. The initiate needed to care for this idol until the age of thirty - that is, the memorization of thirty chapters. At thirty, initiates returned their idols to the high priest. The idols were said to witness each misdeed of the initiates, recording these errors. Once the idols were returned to the temple, there they remained as unseen witnesses. These idols stood about an arm in length, and girls would carry them almost as if caring for babies.

It was common practice in this town not to marry, travel or run into trouble of any sort before reaching thirty. The holy book didn't specify which misdeeds might be recorded during those years leading to the thirtieth birthday, and since no one knew exactly what to avoid, all possible diversions were resisted before thirty. Given the long wait, the townsfolk sometimes had trouble distinguishing events from dreams.

It happened or it didn't, that early one morning a girl announced to her father, "Papa, I did it! I memorized the first twelve chapters!" With pride, the father took the holy book between his hands and opened it to the ninth chapter. He started a verse, and asked his daughter to continue from memory. She recited successfully and went on to the next ten verses. Her father beamed and flipped the pages to the eleventh chapter, asking her to finish from memory a verse that he intoned. She succeeded again, to his great delight. He thought to himself that a third and final attempt would either ready her for the procession to the temple, or indicate that she needed more time to refine her memory. Again, this bright child did not fail him. Hearing her recitation, he jumped up, smiled grandly, put on his wool cape and strode out of the house towards the temple.

## *Versatile Idol*

The high priest greeted him with warmth, already guessing the fond father's news. "Yes," said the father, so proud he could barely stand still, "My daughter is ready!" The priest reminded the father of the rules of the ceremony, and set a time for the procession. As word travels fast, quite a cheery crowd escorted the father back to his house, where he announced the date to his family, asking that every step be taken to ensure a smooth and pleasant ceremony.

The procession took place, as planned. The girl performed well when she stepped behind the altar; no shriek pierced the town's tranquility. She emerged in radiance, and accompanied by the high priest, headed to the workshop to be united with her idol. The master idol maker, an overworked artisan covered in sawdust, had on this particular day assigned the task of choosing idols to his son. This tall boy looked over the new initiate with some care, then pointed her toward an idol of olive wood, gently proportioned and tinged with silver. When the girl nodded, he handed this idol to his father, who in turn handed the idol to the joyous initiated.

The girl wrapped the idol in a shawl she had crocheted herself. The idol wore this same shawl through the seasons, and the girl enjoyed walking with her idol cradled in her arms. She grew more pious, carefully adhering to the rules of the city so as never to upset her god. Carrying her idol wherever she went, like all the girls of the city she allocated most of her time to serving the temple, memorizing the holy book and engaging in every custom that might bring her closer to the gods. She even placed her idol at the edge of her bed every night, then knelt and confessed the small sins of the day, asking forgiveness and believing that her idol granted absolution. She felt she could read this message clearly in the lovely eyes of her idol, edged in kohl.

Yet this obedient girl, while carefully appeasing the unknown yet ever possible anger of the gods, began to sense a certain distance between herself and her idol that she could not explain. "Perhaps," she thought, "I have committed some misdeed, or there is something fundamentally wrong in me that I failed to notice before." Her habit of

standing her idol in front of her and confessing her sins only deepened her worry. No matter how she placed her idol and no matter how she oriented her worship, she noticed that the gaze of the idol each day turned incrementally further away from her, no longer meeting her eyes. "Is he looking down at me from such a great distance? Is my sin too horrendous to forgive?" The girl indulged her fancies by placing her god on a stepladder level with her eyes, thinking in this way to capture his glance, but to no avail. "Why would my god shun me?" she thought. She asked her parents to build a high shelf in her room. She thought that by placing the idol on such a shelf she could look far up to meet his eyes, and then confess her sins. Her parents tried to sway her from the idea, but she insisted, "If he can't see me, he can't forgive me." Hence with an excess of love her parents built the shelf just where she wished it to be. No sooner was the shelf completed and the idol placed upon it, than the girl understood how fruitless her idea would prove to be. Not only did the idol's eyes still did not meet her own, but now on closer examination she determined for the first time that something inherent in the rendering of the idol caused this lack of eye contact.

Determined to take stronger action rather than waiting idly for her destiny, the girl decided to save up her pocket money in order to buy a chisel. Once in possession of this tool, she indulged herself in lengthy hours of apprenticeship in the craft of carving. She chiseled the beams around the door of her room, and engraved her name in flowery script on a piece of soft wood that she had found at the market. Soon, no wood could escape her chisel, as her hands became progressively more able. Confident that her idol would not mind looking at her if only he could, she set her mind on this ultimate task of carving.

On a day when the light shone evenly, she gazed appraisingly at the eyes of her idol, and then took her chisel to reproduce these eyes on a piece of silvery wood not unlike the piece from which the idol had been carved. She chiseled her name on one side of the wood with a flourish, and the eyes on the other. She worked through the day and into the night, and when she had completed the copy of the eyes, she

## *Versatile Idol*

allowed herself a long and peaceful sleep. Over the many days that followed, she tried different chiseling techniques she thought might rectify the idol's angle of sight. While not achieving absolute success, she began to feel rather happy with the outcome of her labor. At last, she gained enough confidence to move the idol to her worktable, and to work directly upon it in order to improve its angle of vision. She worked with great care, carving with complete dedication.

The idol that was once the object of her veneration had also become the subject of her foreboding. No matter how hard she tried, the girl sensed emptiness. She remodeled those eyes, rectified, re-chiseled, and retouched, to no avail. She ever thought to enlarge the eyes' sockets and to retouch the face in hopes of reorienting the angle of sight through a more extensive process. Vain was her effort, for this tampering transformed the idol beyond recognition. What could she do? Once the time came to return her idol to the temple, everyone would know that she had tampered with it, and what sin could equal tampering with god's face? She thought of consulting her parents but refrained, for she felt certain that in such a serious case, her father would have to denounce her to the priests. "I can't consciously refuse to reach my thirtieth chapter and hence never return my idol," she thought, "But perhaps the idol maker can help me to find a way out of this quandary."

Early one morning after she had chiseled her idol's face beyond recognition, with much trepidation she headed to the holy workshop, and found the master carver at the counter, as before coated with sawdust and very busy. She had her idol with her, veiled in such a way that the face couldn't be seen. At that early hour, no one else had yet entered the shop. With diffidence, the girl expressed to the master how delighted she felt to care for such a beautiful idol. While cradling the proof of her tampering in her arms, she went on to ask if there might be a chance for her to learn how such perfection could be conceived and carved. "I've been working hard to learn the art of the chisel, but I can go no further on my own," said she. The master carver responded with incomprehensible grumbles. "I really can't understand what you

are saying,” murmured the girl, “Please tell me. It’s important that I understand you.”

After attempting a few more evasions, the old artisan admitted at last, “As for the idol in your arms, I had such a backlog around the time that idol was carved... If I’m not mistaken, my son would be the one who perfected that statue.”

The girl stood resolutely, and now in a clear, firm voice, announced, “Well then, I would like to learn the craft from your son.”

“He is in the workshop most likely, working on another order,” the master maker said frankly, “You can step inside if you’d like.”

Into the workshop she pressed, thanking the old man politely as she went. The boy was there, chiseling and humming, barely aware of his surroundings. The girl picked up a chisel, and started humming too, and in this way began her apprenticeship. He chiseled, and she chiseled, and one day followed another. It took weeks of supposedly anodyne questions before the girl could even hint at her turmoil regarding her own idol. When ready, she offered a hint and nothing more; she first wanted to know if he would help her. Working side by side though, she began to think he would, and so she overcame her alarm and shared with the boy her excruciating fate. “I thought it would look one way, but now it looks another,” she confessed as she wrapped up her story.

The boy attempted nonchalance, resting his elbows on the counter of his workbench and perching his head on his palms as he listened. “It’s done now,” he announced. “What did you think I could do to help? That idol is the vessel for your memory. There’s only one idol that can carry your memory back to the temple.” As he spoke, tears formed in the girl’s eyes, and the boy suddenly found himself more eager to be helpful. “Of course, though, I’ll give you a hand,” he announced, as if he knew after all what to do. The two unwrapped the idol from the girl’s shawl, and again side by side, worked delicately with their chisels, not just that day but for days on end until their work began to bear fruit. From tiny taps at the cheeks, their work extended until the whole idol fell under the spell of the boy’s craft, guided by the detailed advice of

the girl. Sure enough, the idol began to look more like its old self again, and even as it regained its original appearance, the boy and girl developed a friendship, one so close that it could not be contained by the workshop.

Despite a premonition that the idol might denounce her or them to the high priest once it was returned, the girl indulged herself more than often in time spent with her beau. She even felt a fleeting regret that she no longer found such contentment in the company of her idol, given her suspicions that the idol might be recording each of her missteps. Still, she could not break the very serious rule of having her idol with her at all times. At the same time, she felt some security in the idea that the idol would know the limits the girl and the lad were respecting, if ever suspicions arose in the city.

For his part, the boy thought, "I am teaching her how to take care of her idol," and he said the same quite often to his father when he was asked about his unholy outings with this girl.

"Don't worry," said the girl to her mother, "I am learning a craft. Besides, my god is with me wherever I go, and I can't sin while in its company."

Despite her calm temperament, the girl reached such a level of trepidation that, while on a walk with the lad along the dusty alleys weaving behind the workshop, she broke out into a very rapid listing of her fears about returning her idol to the high priest. "He is going to read each and every one of my missteps, from tampering with god's face to my time with you even though neither of us are thirty yet."

The boy wanted to tell her how silly her whole story was. After all, he made idols. In fact he disposed of them once they were returned to the temple, so as to reduce the clutter, though it was both his father's job and his own to maintain the illusions surrounding their craft. He knew perfectly well that nobody would either read nor question a god made of wood. Couldn't he, shouldn't he, look his sweetheart in the eyes and tell her not to worry? He kept listening to her, not knowing exactly how to reply. He couldn't share what he knew, and she might

prefer to ignore what she couldn't dare to know. The boy lost in his thoughts and the girl lost in her fears, this couple reached the outskirts of the town where miles of apple orchards began. As they were quite alone, they held hands. She looked ready to cry for the second time since he had known her. Like a sunbeam, a sudden solution came to the lad. He faced her, looked at her straight in the eyes and announced, "I will ask for your hand!"

A smile brightened the girl's face, but her somber mood held beneath the surface. "You know we can't marry yet," answered she. "We are not thirty yet, and even if I complete the memorization of the thirty chapters, I don't want to hand my idol to the high priest. He will know what god already knows about you and me. We promised to serve the gods."

"Promised whom?" asked the apprentice.

"My idol," she admitted, pulling her idol from under her shawl and standing it on the ground.

"Of course," her beau replied, worrying that his tone might give away his sentiments on the topic. He rubbed his chin for a moment as if conceding the terms of the promise, and continued, "And what did he reply?"

"Well, of course he expects me to abide by my promise."

"Who?" the boy asked, once again surprised.

"Him," she replied pointing to the idol.

Once more the apprentice felt bewildered by his sweetheart's conviction, but forcing a pensive look he pointed to the idol and as if rephrasing what the girl had said, echoed, "So you promised him not to get married before thirty and he agreed." She nodded sympathetically. The lad calmly took up the idol from the ground where it stood, and held it with his arms extended rigidly in front of him.

Trying to decipher both his mood and his next step, the girl asked, "Why are you holding my idol so stiffly? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," replied the boy, even as he swung the idol swiftly over his head, then down onto the ground so hard that it cracked open.

The girl let out a yelp in the form of an "oh," not only because her

## *Versatile Idol*

idol had broken but also because smoke was arising from the idol's splinters. Within seconds, an enormous bearded genie had emerged from the broken wood, cloaked in white. In unison, the young couple stepped back, while the hulking creature held its ground.

"Children, this is your chance," it announced, "Ask for anything!" The girl fell to her knees in prayer while the boy refused to believe his eyes; his lips trembled but he didn't utter a word. "Name your wish, son," said the bearded creature.

The boy looked first at the kneeling girl and then at the creature facing him. He thought, "Why should I be afraid? I've always dealt with the gods!" and he managed to mumble, "E...ter...nity."

Looking down benevolently at the lad, the bearded creature turned and pointed towards the apple trees spread across the fields and up into the surrounding hills. "You will live as many years as you can count apples. Now go!"

Not even waving to the girl who still knelt and prayed, the boy propelled himself into a race against breath, thinking he must not stop if he wished to outlive his natural death. "One apple tree, two apple trees...49...78...114..." He ran around and through the nearest orchard. "Would I still be healthy at that age?" thought he to himself. "119... Making idols for that long won't be any fun, 121... Did he mean apple trees or apples? 122... Of course I am going to stop, I am only human, did he think I could run forever counting trees, 123... I am only human, after all..." Right there, he stopped, short of breath and conviction. "I am going back to ask him to be reasonable, and I am going to be specific, I want that girl, some money, a cure for disease..." He wended his way back to where he had started, and there found his sweetheart, still on her knees but with the color washed from her cheeks. There was no sign whatsoever of the bearded creature.

"Where is he?" asked the boy.

"I asked him not to send you away, but he said that you wanted to go." she replied. "Is that true?"

"No, of course it isn't. That's why I came back. But where is he?"

“I wanted him to free me from my wish, but he said that I must first seal him back into the statue, and that a piece of cloth from my dress passed over the wood would make the statue whole again.”

The boy, still panting, lifted his eyebrows in disbelief. “And then?”

“And then he said that all my wishes will be fulfilled, if I just use common sense.”

“And then what, my sweetheart?” the boy asked, moving closer to the girl whom he thought of already as his own.

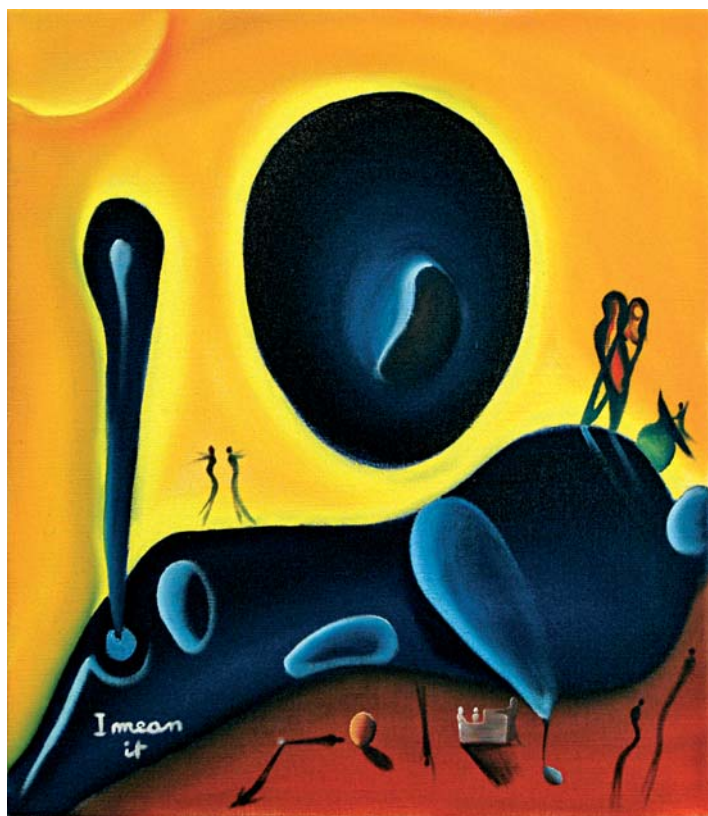
She stepped back, pulled the idol from under her shawl and said, “Here he is, back inside the statue.”

“But what about your wish?”

“That’s what I don’t know yet...” her voice trailed off.

Yet when the boy asked, “So you lost him?” she quickly replied, “Didn’t you run away from him first?”





## ***The Little Sculptor's All-Consuming Piety***

*"Blessed are you who desire, for my kingdom is but a heartbeat away from your eyes."*

*Calligraphy above the temple's entrance door*

When one of the little sculptor's detractors cried out on a bright afternoon in the square, "You are but a blunder insulting the beauty of nature!" the sculptor called back as loudly as he could, adding, "Why should shoulders be the same size? Why should idols have ten fingers? What makes you think that distorted features are less beautiful than the monotony of sameness?" Not one of the bystanders understood what this pathetic yet infamous sculptor bellowed. Some just shrugged as they resumed walking along in all directions. Even the fellow who had provoked him lost interest and went off across the square. The sculptor's angry voice trailed off into emptiness.

He was known for making passable statuettes, but the town authorities were always grumbling about preventable deformities in his work. They never went so far, however, as to accuse him of ill intentions. In addition to a fondness for absinth, the sculptor's eccentricities included always keeping the heavy curtains of his studio closed and working only by candlelight, further complicating his vision. Nevertheless, when the temple authorities sent invitations to each sculptor in the city, inviting them to erect life size statues of the patron goddess, this sculptor received an invitation like all the others.

After receiving the invitation just hours before the first event for the sculptors was to take place, he ventured out of his studio to test the reactions in town. Walking from his studio in the direction of the temple, he thought he understood from whispered comments that his fellow artists wished to exclude him from sculpting the goddess because of his unorthodox sense of proportion. The features of his faces were always contorted, he was sure he could hear them say, the breasts located too high or too low on the body, and the legs uneven. Yet he couldn't change his art, for he found these deformities mysteriously attractive. He had learned to tell himself as a comfort, "Strict proportions cannot lead to perfection. After all, oceans change shape all the time, having neither stillness nor edges, yet nobody questions their beauty." This is what he told himself as he hurriedly took refuge back in his studio.

He picked up the invitation and read it again with care. The first actual event listed in the invitation read, "A visit to the temple to study the icon of the goddess, in preparation for sculptural design." In fact, the precious time he had spent wandering out and returning to his atelier had led him to the very minute of the first event, and he knew he would have to hurry to the temple in order to participate. The sculptor threw on his cloak and walked with short fast strides, concentrating on sculptural forms in his mind so as not to think he was being talked about along the way. In this way he was able to maintain his calm, yet once he was standing before the icon with the other sculptors, he broke into a sweat and shifted his weight from foot to foot. He was a sculptor from his very heart, and he didn't have patience with art in two dimensions. Yet this famous vision of the goddess occupied the front center of the temple alcove. In the image, the goddess appeared to stand firmly on the ground; at the same time she appeared to be looking down from a superhuman height upon the pious. Her nakedness, though attractive, could stir only veneration. Priestesses glided in and out of the sacred space. All of the sculptors knelt together.

"I am honored to serve the temple," the little sculptor called out when his turn came to comment; "Yet I question whether I can sculpt the

## *The Little Sculptor's All-Consuming Piety*

goddess.” Unsure how to explain his confusion, he tried adding, “For I have no third dimension from which to imagine my sculpture, but only the placid surface of this exquisite icon.”

“The gods made us in their image so that we could in turn make statuettes of our own,” responded a priestess. “You have sculpted often enough in the past. If your heart is truly set on excellence, we are sure that you will put the proper effort into sculpting.”

When he saw the sanctimonious expressions of the other sculptors who heard this instruction, and considered the superior tone of the priestess, the little sculptor wondered if some in the group were not indulging in a touch of sarcasm. He didn’t want to speak against his feelings, and so lapsed into silence. “Of course I see errors,” he wished to say. “If I am a concoction of the gods, they had better work harder the next time they put a life together! If the priestess is right, why not just hand out mirrors, instead of carving idols?” He felt increasingly impatient as the session drew to a close and the assembled sculptors, having drunk their visual fill, departed each to his own atelier.

Despite his doubts and sense of distance from the sacred art he had been obliged to behold, the sculptor really did feel a vision of the goddess seize his imagination as he hurried back to his studio along with the others. There was no denying, after all, the beauty of the icon, and the depth present even in its flatness. Guided by visual remnants of the painted icon of the bare goddess, lodged at curious angles in his memory, he began tracing in the air curves and shapes with a finger that itself seemed to float. Once he reached his atelier, he paced around an untouched block of streaked marble and internally reviewed the features of the goddess, her physical proportions and the liquid depths of her eyes. She had looked down, he remembered, a few steps beyond her feet. “Her gaze is divine,” thought the sculptor, “Regardless of where she looks.” Though he had hoped to actually encounter the goddess, he came to terms with the idea of sculpting the interpretation he had seen at the temple, rather than the imagined fullness that he could only pretend to trace in the air.

He began to chip at the stone, and lost sense of time. In fact, the work proved to be a project of many days, and he only broke away from sculpting to return occasionally to the temple. There, he would sit before the icon, and etch each feature of the goddess thoroughly into his memory. His work seemed to be taking a longer time than the work of the other sculptors. When he did meet others at the temple, he diverted their skepticism by assuring them his icon would be ready soon. The whole town was to participate in carrying the statues to the temple, for blessed is he who finishes his statue, and blessed are those who carry statues to the temple. In fact, the little sculptor's work was growing more frightfully beautiful by the day. Fearing his own unmeasured strokes, he strode out of his studio each time he felt carried away by his work's emerging voluptuous shapes, only to study the icon, and return to his work once more. He tried to restrict the progress of his work to precise impressions of the goddess, but the shapes instigated by his hammer and chisel glowed with a life of their own.

In truth, the little sculptor was developing an attachment to his statue, and without any such intention, he soon reached a point in his work when he was loath to leave the statue's side. He even ceased visiting the temple. If he did have to step out, he would cover his statue with a drop cloth, and couldn't resume carving until he had checked several times that the curtains were closed. He knew by this time that whatever he might learn from the image in the temple had already been breathed into the statue; any further progress could only be from his own touch.

Out of the original stone, limbs strode out, curves unfurled, a spirit took hold and soon the whole body of the goddess had become visible. Whenever the sculptor polished parts of his creation, he felt as if a creature were stirring beneath his hands and a pulse seemed to beat just beneath the surfaces he rubbed. "Perhaps my own vague drunkenness is causing this pulsation," he thought, and abstained from running his fingers along the statue's curves. He even oriented the candlelight so that a spread of shadows would cut across the curves

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of the statue, turning her into fragmented, shaded shapes. "Straight lines can hardly be appealing," thought he.

Yet his attachment to this creation deepened still further, until one unusually warm evening, overcome by faintness, he knew that his work was nearing completion. Leaning a moment against the wall, he reviewed each and every part of the statue separately, and discovered that for the first time he had spared his work any kind of deformity. In fact, he had entered a new aesthetic in which he wasn't certain he felt at ease. Convinced on inspection that the statue was indeed a likeness of the deity and could be delivered to the temple, the sculptor indulged himself with a touch of spirits. It was more than a sip, or so he concluded, for when he leaned forward to pick up the cloth with which he usually covered his work, faintness overcame him again. Hastily he flung the cloth back on the statue, and sitting in his chair let his head nod as if he were about to sleep, all the while peeking through his own ruse at his work.

The careless way he had tossed the cloth around the statue left various portions of marble uncovered. The glow thrown by the candle revealed those still uncovered parts in a manner that took his breath away. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head, trying to chase away the thought of being seduced by stone. "Not only stone," thought he, "but my own creation is trying to seduce me." No matter how hard he tried to be impervious to those curves of stone, they and their shadows tempted him to draw close. Something more stubborn than reason chipped away at his equilibrium. He stood up and approached the statue. An arm reached out its loveliness. He gazed deferentially at the glimmering fingertips, recklessly trying to chase down the feeling that attracted him to the unveiled stone.

Even as he gazed, those fingertips became rosy, turning a mix of ochre and crimson. The blemish of rose spread across that wafting arm, cracking it open into flesh. Stunned, the sculptor allowed his hand to inspect the statue's hand. It felt pliant, and so subtle that he feared an illusion behind it. He didn't dare name this illusion flesh, yet he could

not deny its corporeal tone. Still suspecting a hallucination, he slowly uncovered the statue's face from the chin upwards. Wordless, he scrutinized the beckoning lips of the statue. Was somebody hiding inside them? The candle, located on the left of the statue, cast a shadow that seemed to tilt the lips slightly up. The sculptor's eyes fell prey to their design. These lips took no longer than the arm to crack open, heal, and fully resemble flesh. In total confusion, the sculptor didn't know whether to touch the cheeks now growing warm or run away, for he feared an external hand behind the illusions that his eyes were producing. His fingers in slow motion tried to approach the lips, when a voice inside them uttered, "We are real." Even toned, while the lips still squirmed, the voice continued solemnly, "Welcome, little sculptor, to your desire."

The sculptor's own lips managed only to tremble, as he wished he might disappear. "Desire me!" said the lips, "Don't you see that your eyes awakened my graceful stone surface? Desire me!" Exposed to this voice of stone that apparently ignored his distress, he trembled even more and uttered not a word. His stony silence was repeatedly shattered by the voice that cried, "Desire me! Through me, you have made life spring from rock; desire me!" He wished he could simply admire his sculpture, but its voice pierced his confidence, summoning the quavering sculptor, "Unfurl my wrap slowly while bathing my body in candlelight. Your desire will assuage your fear and infuse me with life." The sculptor let these words enter slowly into his mind, and this time, his eyes began to gleam. Though sweat formed on his face, he cupped one hand around the candle's flame, not caring if it might harm him, and with his other hand began to unwind the cloth from the statue. His eyes continuously carried desire to where seduction was concealed, unfurling life across the curves of the statue, laying his dream bare. His eyes, flaring as if with the candle's flame, lit the stone into flesh. Throughout the rest of that voluptuous night, he scrutinized every inch and curve of his statue's body with a desire born of her bareness.

Dawn broke, and the statue still cried, "Desire me!" Only the hot

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wax dripping onto the sculptor's hand brought him long enough to sanity to put the flame out and drop the stump of the candle while still staring at the bare living beauty. "Now, desire my eyes," intoned the statue.

"I can't," replied the sculptor, "I am overwhelmed already... Can't you see?"

"No, I can't," replied the statue, "Can't you see?"

The sculptor tentatively let his eyes pass from her body slowly upwards to confront her divine gaze. Still she looked down, with no sign of life either around or in her eyes. He continued to glance surreptitiously in the direction of her eyes, but losing courage lowered his eyes to the rest of her body. The statue's eyes seemed to clutch the floor with no hope of crossing the sculptor's line of vision. "I can't," he repeated, "I can't, really. Though I would give you my eyes, I can't imagine how to desire yours, for I carved you as my vision of divinity." He leaned down and looked up again, trying to meet her gaze. Growing furious with his failure, and longing for air, he suddenly turned his back on his work and darted out of his house toward the temple where he reverted to his habit of consulting the icon of the goddess.

The sun burned on the path, and he had trouble adjusting his eyes to the light. He scurried into the gloom of the temple, and again had to wait for his vision to adjust. Nothing in the temple had been displaced, or so he thought. The painting still occupied the same space, inviting veneration. Yet, the colors seemed less brilliant, as if infinitesimally vanishing, and the eyes looked fonder of the distant ground, as if a painter had touched them with a shadow. Struggling to turn his eyes away from the comfort of the painting and to return yet again to the trouble waiting at home, he had a worrisome thought. "I can't believe I passed my eyes all over that statue with such lust. She is after all a goddess, though I made her. I must have been drunk." This he repeated to himself, and then resumed with some relief, "I am drunk!" Still smitten with ambivalence, he began walking heavily back toward his workshop. As he trudged, he raised his arms as high as his

eyes and gazed at them. He waggled his fingers slowly, as if through water. He then dropped his hands and dug them in his pockets. He felt his path to be strewn with worries and doubts. Was that which he had seen in his workshop true? And if so, who precisely had witnessed life glowing within the statue? Could that have been he? Still incredulous and struck by the sun severing the blue silence of the sky, he held to his heavy pace.

When he arrived at his workshop, desire still called out to him. Those parts that remained stone in the statue still stood bare and motionless, while the rest pulsed rosy and warm. “Desire me.” He tiptoed to the statue, hearing his heart beat along the way. When very near, he reached up and ran his fingers through her hair, and the feel of these stone strands of hair transforming as if to velvet gave him the fortitude to look mutely into her eyes, his own eyes flaring with desire. With this gaze, he saw life spring within her eyes. Grandly now, she intoned, “Desire me,” as she strode off her pedestal with her eyes fixed on her creator. She then leaned languidly over to pick up from the floor the cloth that had enfolded her. She wrapped it around her waist. The sculptor followed her moves obliquely and with increasing disorientation, until as if to mock his own distress he broke into a temper, the force of which propelled him right out of his studio and straight back to the temple.

A welcoming priestess, whom he had never seen before, stood at the gate. She measured his blurred eyes evenly. “Has she come to life?” this priestess enquired.

The sculptor, now past the stage of astonishment, simply nodded, curled his fingers inside his pockets around some grit and chips of stone, and mumbled, “I suppose, but who is she?”

“Whomever you had in mind.”

He fought for words, warmed by the thought of a kind interlocutor, and replied, “When I sculpted before, each piece was crooked. Don’t you find that worrisome?”

“More or less, depending how you look at it,” replied the priestess.

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“You might say this work is crooked too, as you have disfigured your subject’s sanctity.”

As if this were the answer he had sought, the sculptor mumbled his thanks and turned to depart when the priestess laid her arm on his shoulder and asked him to wait, saying she would accompany him. She draped herself in a cloak and walked along with him companionably toward his workplace. When about to enter his atelier, she asked, “Do you fear your own thoughts?”

He didn’t reply at first, but as they passed through the door, he managed, “It doesn’t matter anymore, for at this rate I am not going to place my statue properly in the temple like all the other sculptors.”

“Oh, there’s no doubt about that!” the priestess this time merrily agreed.

Her cheer seemed eerie to the sculptor in the quiet of the studio, as ever heavily-curtained but now so suffocating that he longed to be outside again. His eyes fluttered about the gloom, and he observed that nothing had been displaced or even approached. He lit a candle and handed it to the priestess, then lit a second one, following its light toward the curtained window. He managed to unlatch the window without drawing the curtains, letting a breeze slide in. Lost in worry, he almost stumbled upon a table when he heard his sculpture’s voice. He turned. To his surprise, his creation was standing up by her former pedestal, as the priestess mutely gazed at her exquisite features of living stone.

“I don’t know whom to compliment: your statue, for her elegance, or you, for your desire,” the priestess murmured when neither sculptor nor sculpted spoke. She began to walk slowly around the new creation, which at the same time dropped the cloth that covered her waist and pirouetted, mirroring the priestess’ merry smile.

“What do you think nests in his brain?” the sculpture asked the priestess. “Don’t you worry?”

“Perhaps, for once the gods learn of this creation, they will not only force you to cease existing, they will also take measures against him, and strong ones too I imagine, for his desire is unsettling.”

The sculptor, standing between his creation and the priestess, felt his eyelids twitching rapidly. He covered his eyes for a moment with his hands, and murmured, "Desire is beyond the gods' reach."

The priestess responded sharply, "Mind your words, little sculptor, for nothing is beyond the reach of the gods."

The sculptor tucked his head down, for he didn't want the priestess to see that he was still indulging in his illusions. However, as he lowered his head, his eyes settled briefly on the statue's neck and to his surprise, that neck reshaped itself into a still more graceful curve. The priestess jumped back, then moved quickly to the window and drew the reluctant, dust-laden curtains open, flooding the studio with sharp sunlight. Shaking her finger at the sculptor, she warned him, "Your sculpture is still malleable! Refrain from touching her."

"Forgive me," whispered the sculptor, "But I didn't touch her. I simply looked."

"No. You desired!" the priestess concluded firmly. "Your only escape from the wrath of the gods will be to submit to their will, for malleable flesh and constant desire would otherwise soon collide, and alter the image of divinity." As she spoke, the priestess drew off her own cloak and wrapped it around the statue.

The new creation disappeared into the cloak's folds even as beauty sprang from her eyes, and the sculptor asked candidly, "What must I do?"

"The gods entitle priestesses to administer a cleansing potion. Once you drink this potion, the gods will allow me to fly into your brain and to remove every oddity still clogging your mind."

"But that would erase me!" the sculptor exclaimed, and he rejected the proposal of the priestess not only on that day, but on the days that followed as well. The priestess continued to stop by his studio for a time with her offer, but after hearing no often enough, she ceased her visits. However, as the ceremony for the placement of the statues around the temple neared, the sculptor again began to dread the mockery of his peers. He imagined that he would be forced either to expose his

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creation and hence perhaps to lose her, or to admit his failure to produce a proper statue. Either way he would face ridicule, he thought, pinned between his anxiety and the fear of the cure that the priestess might unleash. "The power of creativity," he sighed to himself, "offends the gods, yet failure in the eyes of men is humiliating." This dilemma drove him from his studio to the temple yet again. There he sought out the priestess, and when he saw her welcoming expression, he allowed himself for the first time to feel more comfortable with her offer. First making sure that no one was close enough to hear, he confided, "Apprehension has driven me to agree to your proposal, against my better judgment, but in return you must promise not to speak a word to anyone about my creation. To the cheering crowd on the day of the placement of the statues you must simply announce that I donated a beautiful statue, and that my statue due to its uniqueness will be kept within the temple in a sacred spot not visible to the public. People might doubt my sincerity, but not yours."

Reassuring the sculptor that his secret would be safe, the priestess withdrew into an inner chamber. Moments later she reemerged, and handed her patient a clay vial no larger than a bottle of perfume. He drank, hesitantly but without stopping, until the vial was empty. As the liquid passed down his throat, the priestess before him turned into a limpid steam that entered him through his nostrils. The sculptor felt faint, dropped to his knees, and then bent forward, holding his head in his hands. He rocked back and forth. Pain spread through his skull, throwing him into a temper, and then sinking him back into a whirl of faintness. Wobbling, he tried to regain his feet, and then in order to avoid a fall, leaned over to form a fragile pyramid with his body, but his whole frame listed to the left, until he collapsed like a corpse onto the floor.

As if through a haze, the little sculptor could see the priestess; she was greeting his courage with warmth. "I have removed the stains of desire from your mind," she explained, "You need no longer fear your own thoughts." There the priestess stood, diaphanous and welcoming,

right before him, and he found that he had nothing to say or to ask. He felt so weak that he even wondered if his knees could bear his weight all the way home. “Feeling weak is normal, after such a cleansing,” said the priestess brightly, “Some rest will do you good.” The sculptor flexed his feet and legs, trying to prepare his body to walk with conviction, when the priestess added as an afterthought, “You know, it’s the strangest thing. Nestled in your heart, I found a tiny locked wish that I didn’t destroy. I took it instead just as it was, a miniature locked scroll, to keep in the temple coffer along with this medicine vial.”

“What wish?” asked the sculptor, suddenly awake and curious.

“How should I know? I didn’t open it. What do you think it might be?”

“How could I know? Why didn’t you destroy it, or better yet, open it?”

“I couldn’t,” she explained, “Not a wish. The gods never authorized me to deal in wishes, only desires. So I am not authorized to know your wish. And because I don’t know its contents, I certainly mustn’t venture to destroy it.”

“Can I have it?” asked he, uncurling his fingers and reaching his hand towards her.

“Oh dear no,” replied the priestess, “Nobody I know of walks around with his wishes in his pocket.” She furrowed her brow, and then added, “I would hand it over to you if you were ever really in need of it, but for the moment it’s safer in the temple than in your hands.”

The sculptor missed the grand parade to the temple on the day of the presentation of statues. Back in his studio, he passively lay on the divan beside his creation, no longer burning with desire, yet feeling no wish to go outside. In fact, he was consumed by emptiness, and had been indulging in long draughts of spirits. He knew the priestess had kept her promise and had not divulged the secret of his creation. At the same time, he was a sorry witness to the dimming of his own desire. The public would believe that his statue had been placed in the temple’s inner room, but the priestess had deemed it best to keep the statue far

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from the dwelling of the gods, and so the sculpture remained right in the studio. The sculptor was in a very sensitive mood, as he tried to fully understand the effects of the cleansing he had undergone. He didn't feel very satisfied with the results, for besides lapsing into grimness, the sculptor found that he could no longer sculpt. He tried to hold the chisel, but he felt more like smoothing the contours of his current creation than stirring himself to start a new one. He knew better than anybody else that only desire could perfect his creation; hence the chisel was superfluous.

Long after the parade had receded away from his atelier and toward the temple, the sculptor lounged by his creation, running his fingers through her hair. As if talking to himself, he murmured on about the many strange events he had experienced, lingering on the details of his conversation with the priestess about his wish on a tiny scroll. As he spoke about his unread wish, the sculpture suddenly reacted, pushing his hand away. Abruptly, she asked, "Why does that priestess think that your wish is better off in a temple?" The sculptor thought, but could not answer her question. She watched him, and he found her gaze rather reproachful. He considered the question from various angles, far into the evening, and the more he considered, the more he thought that the wish might be better kept in his own possession. Given the crowds he imagined must still be in the temple's vicinity due to the grand parade, the sculptor thought to sneak incognito from his atelier and insinuate himself into that back room of the temple where the priestess had withdrawn when she brought the vial for his cleansing.

With an almost lifeless glance at his sculpture, he drew on his cloak and ventured out of the atelier, surreptitiously melting into the temple crowd, and found his way to the inner chamber where the clay vial was kept. He opened that archive, searching for his wish among the scrolls of dreams and desires. One scroll only was locked, and so he knew it must be the one that bore his wish. He grabbed it and swiftly merged into the crowd, heading home. He swung open the door of the atelier, eager to share his success with his creation. But she, apparently

interested in the presence of the scroll rather than in its contents, simply jumped naked onto the pedestal and called out, "Desire me again, and perfect my unevenness!"

The sculptor gazed at her, quite taken aback. "My creation, you know that wishes cannot bring back desire, don't you?"

"I don't," she snapped, and as she spoke, his desire suddenly flamed back to its former strength.

The sculptor, holding in one hand the scroll of his wish, slowly permitted his features to radiate his rekindled craving. He moved his eyes to the statue's neck, just where he had left off when the priestess had called him to task. However, at that very spot where he expected his eyes to snatch away any remaining imperfections and replace them with flawlessness, instead, scratches appeared. Her cheeks he so desired, her eyes that he believed he could enchant, her shoulders, her belly, her thighs started peeling off, like paint from a wall. No mirror was placed in the room to trigger his creation's panic, yet she too could feel her body begin to shed its own integrity. "Stop!" cried she, "Why, you must close your eyes and ears and... never mind!" and she swiftly wrapped herself from top to toe back in the drop cloth. At the same time, she pointed to his chisel and chimed, "No doubt you can start sculpting again."

The sculptor walked slowly toward her and with one hand touched her scratches. "Maybe," he tried, "You could get repaired again, once my desire overcomes my fear."

"Don't try anything else," she cried, stepping back.

The sculptor turned red, and holding tight to the scroll of his wish, spoke without moving, "Why should we shun one another?" He stepped closer to his creation even as she tried to find her way around him, until they collided. The drop cloth fell. Rather than be exposed, the sculptor's creation grabbed the scroll from his hand and stepped back. "I am holding your wish now. What is your wish?"

"I don't know," he answered, trying to grab the scroll back from her, "But it is surely as harmful as any."

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“I thought it would be your path to perfection.”

“I did too,” he replied as she unfurled the scroll. A fume strode out of it, and within seconds, turned the sculptor to stone.



## *Noilamgyp*

Though heavily populated, this ornate town nonetheless showed no signs of life. The townsfolk never had children, nor hazarded to step outside their homes. Their houses, neither painted nor renovated, offered to this flat place no more than the appearance of a cemetery. Yet a large number of libraries and theaters, adorned by fluted columns and marble pediments, decorated the streets. The town was further graced by a rumor about a personage whose name no one dared to pronounce, a certain Noilamgyp.

The noble lineage of this Noilamgyp could be felt and feared even within the letters of his name, making the word itself a danger to the tongue. In fact, Noilamgyp couldn't even pronounce his name himself; the letters caused him to revert to a fearful stutter.

It was whispered everywhere that this Noilamgyp lived underground, surfacing only now and again to receive packages from the heavens such as magical palettes and paints, and at the same time to deposit dozens of books and paintings within the town's palaces of arts and science. After these ghostly transactions, he would disappear once more beneath the ground.

Rumor had it that the father of this fellow was the twin brother of Zeus, who when drunk had cavorted with an earthling; in turn, the earthling had already cavorted with Baal! Such muddled ancestry, along with the silence of the implicated gods, burdened the unfortunate

Noilamgyp with a reputation that continuously upset the divinities. In fact, since Noilamgyp had relations both among the gods and on earth, it had fallen upon him to run a workshop where those souls wishing to escape the limitations of celestial existence could come to have bodies fashioned to size. The gods permitted Noilamgyp to undertake this work offhandedly and against their better judgment.

There were two kinds of souls that sought relief from Noilamgyp: those that loved one another and who in the heavens couldn't consummate their love, and likewise those imbued with great hatreds to the point of wishing murder. Indifferent to their motivations, Noilamgyp kept busy with the task he had been assigned.

Using clay, of which there was no shortage in his underground world, he sculpted bodies for those who would live on earth. He would apply the finishing touches with paint from his magical palette, every dab applied just so with beauty and proportion in mind. Before breathing life into one of these forms, he would always seize the soul as a deposit and chain it to the wall of his cavern, only then allowing the form to go amble on the surface in its search. Noilamgyp took this precaution in case the form might wish to return to his studio due to a change in heart, though in fact this never happened, for Earth's attractions had always been without limits. Such authority over souls also led souls and all other celestial creatures to nickname Noilamgyp elaborately, "Demi-Dieu," or "Assistant Creator," titles that sounded to Noilamgyp like mockery. When so addressed he would respond to those whom he saw as detractors, "No ridicule will change my conviction. Here beneath the earth, the souls must be kept in check."

A pin might have tipped the balance and driven the gods to jealousy of Noilamgyp; he was talked of even more than Zeus, a detail not missed in the heavens. All of this fame did not save him, however, from a sense of desolation, particularly because the souls chained in his cave were far from quiet in enduring their underground existence. Now screaming, now wailing for mercy, they whiled away their time, perhaps mirroring the sentiments of their physical forms wandering on the surface. Yet

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despite their complaining, these souls never went so far as to amend their decisions and summon their forms to return back down below.

As he perceived himself to have neither a choice nor the desire for a choice, Noilamgyp continued to sculpt and never mentioned to newcomers the torment that their predecessors were already suffering – that is, until the day when a certain winsome soul, apparently ill fit for suffering, presented herself to him. Too feminine, this soul gained entrance to his studio after holding forth about her limitless love for hibiscus blossoms. At once, Noilamgyp called out to her, “Go home! You don’t belong here!”

Glancing around Noilamgyp’s untidy studio, this soul responded, “I most certainly do belong here, because I wish, Vice Creator, to rejoice in the hibiscus’ extraordinary shade of red.” Ignorant to his very depths about this story of flowers and colors, Noilamgyp pretended to ponder, while the soul forged ahead, “I’ve long waited for the moment when I would be able to caress hibiscus petals.”

“This all must mean that she really does want a body,” said Noilamgyp to himself, while nodding sagely. He went over to his artist’s stool and perched on it, took a deep breath, and laid down the customary conditions, trying his best to sound ominous in order to frighten her away.

“That doesn’t sound very nice,” observed the soul, yet she didn’t hesitate despite her better judgment to accept Noilamgyp’s conditions. At this, the artist reminded himself that he had no choice and he set to work while the soul hovered beside him, surveying some of the works in progress around his studio and making no effort to hide her tastes.

Once Noilamgyp had a body for this soul well under way, she proved to be downright exigent: “Could you, Vice Creator, make my chest protrude less so that I can slip through the forests easily... I would rather, Vice Creator, be light and nimble... Please, Vice Creator, make my eyes powerful so that I can more closely scrutinize the flowers.” Noilamgyp said not a word to this soul, which didn’t cease to intervene and to demand changes to its form. In strict adherence to his rules, he

had hardly finished his sculpture when he seized the soul and chained it to a wall. "Why can't my eyes be wider," she sighed, as he fixed the chains around her, and determinedly indifferent to her sorrows blew life into her form. A young woman danced up from the underground lightly as air, leaving Noilamgyp behind. He sighed once, but quickly put an end to any sentiment and turned back to his sculpting.

Noilamgyp had no need to measure time in his lair, but he did know when he was running out of leavening for his clay, and at those intervals he would come up to the town to receive his order from the heavens. On such a day, he was busy at the mouth of his cave preparing to receive an order when a cry more poignant than any he remembered broke the pleasure of his silence. As this cry intensified, Noilamgyp began to look for its source. At first he couldn't locate it. Only on returning to his studio did he recall a soul enamored of hibiscus flowers that he had chained in a forgotten corner. "How inconvenient," he muttered as he glanced at this weeping soul. He watched for some time, and found that the soul's pain made him uncomfortable, yet he couldn't move his eyes away. As that momentary glance became prolonged beyond the time for sleeping and for rising, he asked in surprise, "Could it be that I feel something for this soul?" To test his doubts, he announced his presence to her by clearing his throat to get her attention. "Soul, might I ask you a personal question?"

"Be quick about it," she answered, "for I feel better when I scream, and if I stop screaming for too long, destiny might profit from my silence by making my body suffer even more."

"Is that why you are crying?"

"I never knew, Vice Creator, that roses fade and live only for the space of a desire. They look so proud from above and so attached to life that I never suspected they could be lost even for a moment."

"My clay has a strange quality," replied Noilamgyp. "The more it ages, the more attached to life it becomes, and to illusions. I might have given you more warning..."

"And what might my illusions be?"

## *Noilamgyp*

“You know yourself well enough, I suppose,” ventured Noilamgyp. “I ought not to...” and he stumbled for words.

As he stood by her side with his back to the studio wall, Noilamgyp could no longer deny the interest he had developed for this soul. Yet he so feared false steps that he tore himself away and went back to sculpting, singing loudly at the same time in order not to hear her cries. Not for long, however. His song faded, for he couldn't sustain the notes, and he found himself involuntarily staring once again across his studio at that unfortunate soul, even to the point of feeling a need to declare his newly discovered passion by speaking with her. “I feel for you, chained soul,” he tried.

“Vice Creator,” answered she with some irritation, “In my current state, chained and suffering, it is impossible for me to respond to your feelings, unless you are able to convince my terrestrial body to return your clay to you once more.”

“But you are the one,” sighed Noilamgyp, “for whom I care.”

“That doesn't change the fact that the woman in clay whom you have made of me is better able to answer your desire than I. I can only suffer here, and cannot offer you my heart.”

“So be it then,” Noilamgyp announced, “I will convince her to love me!” He went back to his artist's stool, perched upon it, and holding his head in his hands, meditated on many questions. “I am resolute,” he pronounced to himself at last, “about putting an end to my hesitation.” He looked with brief regret around his subterranean world, and then like a shiver, passed through a crevice and ascended to the terrestrial world.

Just above the corner where the soul he loved was chained, he discovered a little garden resplendent in the noon with hibiscus and roses, and replete with a gated arbor. Noilamgyp rolled up the sleeves of his smock, approached that picket gate, and knocked smartly. He knocked and knocked, so long that he feared he might lose hope. “I have too many important things to do to allow myself to sacrifice such a long moment knocking on a woman's door,” thought he. “I will open

this gate myself, come what may.” He extended his hand toward the knob and started to open the gate when a woman arrived behind him, crossed directly past him, opened the gate and then swung it sharply behind her. However, the gate didn’t close, for Noilamgyp had quickly stood in its path precisely to stop it from closing. The woman looked about her in surprise, and disappeared through the arbor only to reappear moments later with an oilcan. “Don’t force the gate,” announced Noilamgyp, “I am the one who blocked it.” The woman seemed not to note his presence at all and oiled the joints as if nothing had been said. “I don’t understand why, mademoiselle, you are so indifferent to my presence. Have you forgotten who I am?”

The woman didn’t answer Noilamgyp, but murmured, “I must find a carpenter. This gate seems so obtuse; it is clearly blocked by something.”

Noilamgyp abruptly let go of the gate that the woman was still oiling. The gate bumped against her and she stepped aside. As if to reassure her that he planned to leave and not to bother her ceaselessly, Noilamgyp placed a tentative hand on her shoulder, but his hand passed through her and did not attract her attention at all. Feeling forlorn and incapable, Noilamgyp retraced his steps all the way back to the opening of his cave. “I am imperceptible to people,” he grieved, but his sorrow led him surely to a creative idea, and suddenly he was hurrying like a madman into his studio. There, he grabbed a bit of clay and rolled it between his fingers, and then just as eagerly he rushed back through the crevice to the earth’s surface. He was at once at the arbor, and there impatient and proud, he tapped his bit of clay against the gate of his beloved, and waited until she came to see who had tapped. She looked astonished as she noted the finger of clay at the gate, and despite some misgivings gathered that clay into her hands. Apparently finding its texture strange, she rolled it about. Damp from the garden, her hands made the clay soft, and it soon took a shape that deeply impressed the lady. “It reminds me of a sparrow,” she hazarded to herself, “And look, it has a little scratch on its chest. I’ll take it with me. I can smooth away

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the scratch.” She wrapped this clay in a handkerchief, put it in her pocket, and retreated through the arbor, out of sight of the staunchly waiting Noilamgyp.

Yet again overlooked, Noilamgyp returned to his studio seized with a sense of injustice. This time he went directly to the corner where the soul of his sweetheart wept. He wished to confide his own miseries, and began to complain at length. “But that which you feel,” explained the feminine soul, “is the very same sentiment that in greater intensity causes those screams that daily rob you of your solitude.”

Ever keen for this soul to share his passion, Noilamgyp turned again to his clay, determined to assume a full form. “If ever she tries to keep me up there on earth,” he thought, “I’ll simply take the form off again.” Despite a sense of fatigue, he dragged into his workplace a great ball of clay and started to shape a form, in such a hurry that he paid scant attention to details.

On the brink of completing his creation, Noilamgyp stepped back to have a look at what he had made. Though not his best work, the body was suitable enough for an artist, and Noilamgyp had at least thought to clothe it in a capacious painter’s smock. He was surprised to see that he was not alone in scrutinizing his activity, that all the chained souls were staring at him. “Well, it may not be my most perfect work,” he grumbled, “But what is there about my profession that suddenly so interests all of you?”

“It’s nothing really,” said one soul, which in the past had never ceased wailing long enough to speak. “We just want to know if - once you assume a body - you are going to chain your own soul up too.”

Noilamgyp considered this question, and then nodded, saying, “The precautions associated with a body of course apply to us all.” With that, he added a few last dabs of color from the palette he kept for finishing touches, and with a final drop of rose for the cheeks, tossed the palette with a fling to the floor. Looking once more at the chained souls, he approached his new form, embraced it, kissed it, and commenced to breathe into it the breath of life.

Hardly had this new creature taken its first step when Noilamgyp backed himself up to the wall where his beloved was already chained. Yet suspecting that some false creator might come while he was in captivity, and in this case discover and misuse the nimbleness of his palette and clay, he asked a favor of his new form. "Before you chain me," Noilamgyp requested, "take my palette. That way we can avoid mishaps here below." The body acquiesced, shoving the palette into a large pocket, and chained Noilamgyp's soul to the wall. And as the form emerged into the light, it carefully covered with branches the entrance to the cave. This form, the earthly Noilamgyp, could hardly wait to run to his beloved's arbor. He climbed over the boxwood edging the garden and arriving at the little gate, knocked brusquely. A cry of surprise met his ears, and not a friendly cry at that. Still, ever believing himself to be welcome, Noilamgyp smiled and called eagerly, "Yes, it's me!"

"Leave at once!" demanded his beloved, disturbed by the intrusion of a stranger.

"Could it be that I am still a stranger?" lamented Noilamgyp as he drew back to hide behind a marble bench facing the arbor. Once his heartbeat returned to an even pace, he crept around to sit on the bench, hoping for a reprieve.

It was here that he ensconced himself for any number of days. Despite himself, he began in those long hours to appreciate the company of the flowers. He began to wonder at their range of colors, even more diverse than those of his palette, and to wonder too at the clarity of their forms, and the paradox of the strength in their fragile petals. He took the petals between his fingers, and began to rejoice in the sense of touch. He sniffed at the blossoms, and came to know the sense of smell in the most pleasant of ways. "They are almost like souls," he thought with pleasure.

Perhaps the pollen on Noilamgyp's nose brought his sweetheart at last to believe that he merited attention. Perhaps this woman who had eyes only for the hibiscus that she watered and trimmed at last found Noilamgyp numbered among her blossoms. Touched by the tender way

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he had learned to eye her flower's petals, and to water and trim her plantings, perhaps she understood that her first impressions had been in error, and that she had met a kindred spirit.

However stray the cause, under a bright sun on the fortunate day of her change of heart, she put down her watering can, approached Noilamgyp gracefully and sat down beside him on the bench as if inviting him at last to relax. "Don't blame me for noticing your impudence, Mr. Unkown," she began, covering tenderness with a saucy tone. "It may be that I misunderstood you, but that doesn't change the fact that you were brash."

Noilamgyp raised his eyes, astounded at this turn of events, and gazed fixedly into her eyes, then risked a strained smile which he quickly ended by saying, "I believe I am no longer capable of passing by unseen."

She leaned closer on the bench, dusting his nose with her finger, and replied, "All right, so I see you now. But who might you be?" Stung, wondering that she whom he loved more than freedom could ask such a question, for he still had all the pride of his soul, Noilamgyp turned his face away and started to rise from the bench. "No, stay," said she, "I don't know why my question should put you out. Please, call me Rose."

"You don't have to tell me," he stiffly replied, "I already know you."

She drew back this time, remarking, "If you are trying to create a romance, you'll have to do better than that." Ever so slightly encouraged, Noilamgyp remained standing and began to pace, and presently to speak. His beloved fell into step, to his joy listening intently and in such a flattering manner that Noilamgyp began to talk of his art, the souls who longed for bodies, the forms he created for them, the divine task that consumed him, and the jealousy of the gods. He made a special point of the clay that he employed, and the difficulties of ordering leavening. All the while, he distanced himself from the one of whom he spoke, using "he" when he spoke of his own soul, and "she" when he spoke of hers, rather than you and I. "But who are you then," she

asked him perplexed, “and what do you like to be called?” Pretending not to have heard her, despite the increasing intimacy of her interjections, Noilamgyp persisted in speaking of his creations. “But what’s your name?” Cleverly preparing to evade the question once more, Noilamgyp was stopped short when the woman caught him by his shirt, held on firmly, and repeated her question, adding, “How can I know someone who is so ignorant of himself!”

In agony, and seized by an overwhelming inertia, Noilamgyp closed his eyes. He tried to speak, and could only stutter, “No... No... No,” producing a sound much like the cries of the souls below. Anguished by his inability to produce more than a stutter, he attempted to rally, boasting ingeniously, “Not only do I create, but I also breathe life!”

Relentlessly, Rose responded, “But that’s of no use to me! Despite the qualities with which destiny endowed you, you are apparently incapable of carrying the imprint of a name – an achievement so simple that even mortals take only limited pride in it... Or do you just not want to tell me your name?”

Noilamgyp sighed a long sigh, and tried yet again to pronounce his name. Betrayed as before by his incapacity, he improvised, “At least I am allowed to share my title. I am the Vice God, the Assistant Creator, the...” Rose yawned, stopping Noilamgyp in mid-phrase, clearly unimpressed by titles. At this point, poised on his tiptoes as if trying to reach for something, Noilamgyp returned his feet to the earth. He pointed down and said, “Surely I will be reproached for saying this, but I am also called, my name is... NOILAMGYP,” and he crowed his name as loudly as he could, even while stiffening his shoulders and straining his neck.

“Noilamgyp? That’s a funny name. Still, it’s you, after all!” remarked the woman, clearly pleased.

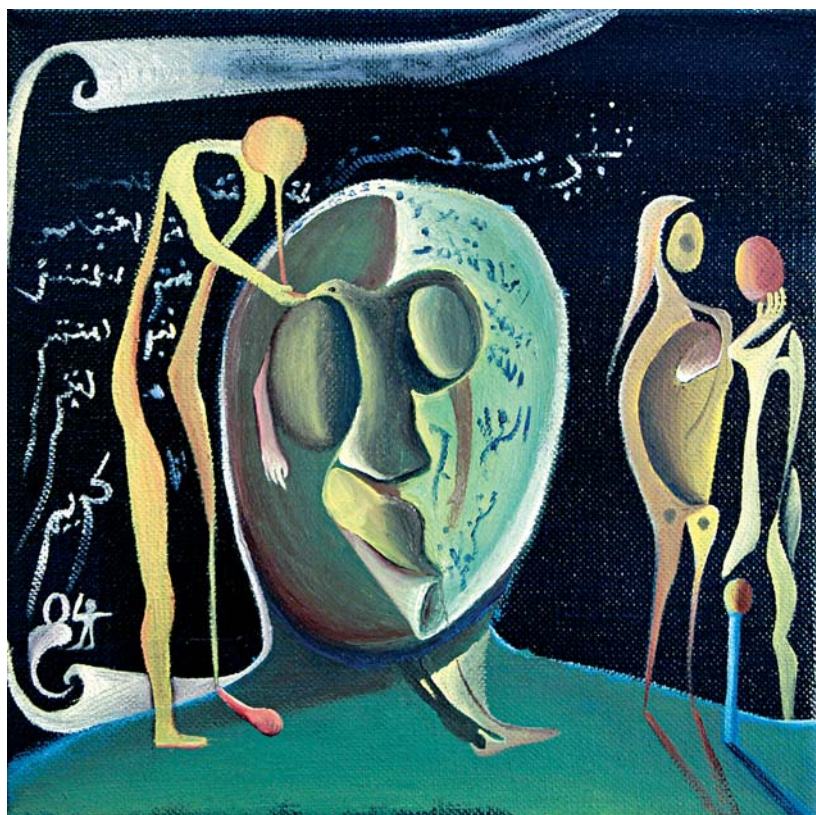
Caressed by this voice enjoying the pronunciation of his name, Noilamgyp pressed his heels hard into the earth and called out again and again, “Noilamgyp!”

As his cries gained force, his beloved joined her voice with his, then

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took his right hand and pulled it toward herself. Their hands were so warm when joined that they delighted in pressing them even closer together, but even as they enjoyed this moment of harmony, suddenly, through the earth's crust there surged a monstrous hand to interrupt them. This huge appendage grabbed onto Noilamgyp's arm and began trying to pull him down below. The terrestrial Noilamgyp pulled back, fighting as hard as he could to liberate himself from this vindictive hand, a hand he could not help but realize was none other than the hand of his soul. His struggle proved to be in vain, until he thought to draw from the pocket of his smock the palette that he had carried since his creation. Resolutely, he pushed this palette into the grip of the subterranean hand.

As if sated by the palette, the monstrous hand withdrew into the earth, as Noilamgyp shouted after it in ecstasy, "Return to your art! For life, here I am."



## *Refrain*

*I am the silence that is incomprehensible  
I am the utterance of my name*

From *Thunder, Perfect Mind* (A Nag Hammadi Scroll)

There was and there was not, not so long ago, a man who fancied himself an author though he was so little known that he even had trouble remembering his own name. Alas! He had a surplus of imagination, but only a little money, and he dreamed of seeing his play produced. He couldn't sell his work; yet labor was not so costly in his country, so he hired a prompter, rented a stage, and paid a dozen strangers to be his audience.

He had some trouble hiring a pair of actors. The first pair he approached refused to act for him, as did the second, and the third. Luckily, just an hour before the time for his premiere, while drinking espresso in a smoky café, he ran into two old acquaintances from the world of the theater and made them a proposal. "Listen," he said, "I have rented a stage for an hour, just an hour from now. The duo I booked fell ill. Could you fill in for me? I'll pay you, and if you're lucky, you may rise to fame."

Well, these actors couldn't blame the playwright for his poor reputation, since their own wasn't any better. Many a time they had been booed right off the stage. So, this job sounded good enough. "Where's the script?" they asked.

“I had one in mind,” said he, “but I didn’t get it down in time. The title is ready, though, and it’s tricky too: The Prompter’s Impromptu.” He gazed at the actress humbly and stroked his beard, as if to win her over.

“I don’t like it,” the actress said, but her companion elbowed her, and they agreed to improvise. They finished their coffees, walked over to the theater and entered by the backstage door, the actors following the playwright.

While standing in the wings, the playwright paid the actors half the promised sum, saying they would get the rest when the play was over. The audience was already stamping and whistling for the play to start, and calling out, “Remember, you only paid us for an hour!”

“Improvise!” the playwright whispered as he pushed the actors onto the stage, “And look like you know what you are doing!”

The actors rolled their eyes. The man tumbled on stage first. He was a sad sight, out of shape and tongue-tied. People in the audience started clearing their throats and sinking lower in their chairs, so the actor thought he had better call for his partner. “When she appears, she shines like Venus in the night,” he announced. His partner shuffled on stage. Luckily, there were two comfy chairs left from some past scene. They both sat down and faced each other, and for lack of a plan the man began frankly, “What a coincidence that we ran into that failed playwright with his strange offer, right next door at the café.”

“Shh! Keep him out of this. We don’t want the audience to know, do we?”

“I shouldn’t talk about him?”

“Sure you should!” a voice called from the prompter’s booth backstage.

The actors looked at each other in surprise. “He hired a prompter for an improvised play?” asked the actress.

“Let’s just ignore that prompter. After all, he can’t...”

“... Know what we are going to say!” the prompter smoothly finished the sentence.

## *Refrain*

“Was that what you were going to say?” asked the actor, rising nervously from his seat.

“I don’t remember, but yes, I think so,” replied the actress.

“Impossible,” exclaimed the man, “We can’t have a prompter for a play we are making up ourselves.”

“This is a delusion!” shrieked the prompter.

The actor tried to carry on, “Cooked up by that miserable playwright whom I’ve always...”

“Despised,” called out the prompter with delight.

“Perhaps this is myself talking all along?” mused the actor scratching his head. Then he added, “My voice changes sometimes due to cold air. Is there a draft in here?” The actor held his finger up as if to check for a breeze. Dissatisfied, he then peered toward the curtain at stage right, which rustled slightly. Suddenly with all his might he pushed the curtain aside and reached behind it. His eyes widened as he pulled the prompter out of his corner. “He’s just improvising,” the actor ventured as he pulled.

The prompter stumbled out, a short older man with a potbelly and a stubby beard, holding a dog-eared script and wearing a stopwatch over a smock splashed with plaster. He looked about himself vaguely. Nevertheless, a smattering of applause greeted his arrival, so he bowed to the public, swinging his shaggy head from right to left in rhythm with the clapping. Once fully on stage, the prompter stood straighter, and stated, “After all, I have a script in front of me and my duty is to prompt whenever needed.” He straightened fully, to attention, and added, “I shall perform my duty against all odds, because...”

“Because what?” growled the actor, as both he and his partner inched closer to the prompter, bent, and pulled the script from his hands.

“There’s not a word written here!” the actress announced. “You are just making things up, and confusing our audience.”

“What do you know?” replied the prompter. “Look at me, I should know something. I’m at least as old as Moses! Of course you can’t read

this script. It was handed to me directly by the playwright, and he told me at the time, ‘Don’t worry about losing it; you can always rewrite it.’”

“What a joke,” laughed the actress.

At the same time, her partner raised his arms in a helpless gesture and let the script drop to the floor. His back stiffened, and he frowned, appearing to take affront at his lack of authority. “What’s so funny?” the actor asked. “Whether on the stage or off it, a man like me would like to feel respected, and this fellow isn’t respectful. That’s right, not respectful, not one bit.” As he spoke, his voice grew louder and his face reddened. Moving until he was directly in front of the prompter to the point of touching belly to belly, he took hold of the prompter’s smock by the collar.

Wriggling his neck despite the actor’s grasp, the prompter managed to peek over and to read the open page of the script now on the floor, prompting, “It is a sad joke, a joke on us poor actors!”

Hearing this, the actor dropped his hands, turned to the public, and repeated, “It is a sad joke,” as he dropped back down into one of the chairs with a mighty sigh. The prompter smoothed his smock and prepared to go back to his corner, winning some applause as he made a bashful curtsy, forgetting to bow. Even the actors tittered, until the prompter was hidden again in the wing.

At this hiatus, the actor muttered to his partner, “What next?”

“Might I consult the script?” called the prompter, back in his box and ready to assist.

“The script?” repeated the actor, “If anyone consults that travesty, it will be me!” He looked for the script as he spoke, and took some time to remember that he had thrown it on the floor. As if inspired by the sight of the script there on the wooden stage, he leaped into the air and landed precariously with his feet together on its cover. Oddly enough, the script’s cover pushed back against his feet, attempting to open itself with such thrust that the actor stumbled. His partner stepped forward and tried to place her own weight on the script to help him keep it closed, but to no avail: the cover pushed the actors up just as hard as

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they were pushing it down. The actors continued pushing and leaping up and down on the script, but the opposing force not only held them at bay but also prevailed, throwing the actors back into their chairs.

Now wide open, the script's pages started curling one after the other into scroll-like tubes that rolled forward and tipped themselves upright, transforming into human beings. Before the eyes of all gathered, characters started to emerge. None looked familiar to the actors, who watched in silence, though the audience had moved quickly from grumbling, to rustling, to "ohs" of recognition. Two of the newly emerging characters were dressed like a king and a queen. One character had bandages around his finger stubs, while a woman danced lightly in place sporting only a fig leaf, and a delicate man carried a huge head in his hands.

This odd procession paraded to fill the stage. Once in position, all turned and bowed to the audience except one, a portly fellow in royal robes who stepped forward to introduce himself. "I am the king, if you know what I mean," said he, adjusting his crown. "I move freely from story to story. I am he whose Eden is an echo, I am the text that never was, I am..."

"At least you wrote a text before you misplaced it," interrupted a skinny lad dressed like a hermit, who had just risen out of the script as if from hibernation, rubbing his eyes and complaining of loneliness.

"You poor misbegotten creatures," roared the king. "Blame the playwright!" He turned toward the prompter hidden in the wings, and asked, "Are you the playwright?"

"Most certainly not," replied the prompter, joining the crowd on stage.

"So where might the playwright be?" asked a lady dressed as a queen. She nodded curtly to the audience, adjusted her crown, waggled her fan and stepped forward. "My husband may sound sophomoric, and I may sound vain, but let me assure you of one thing," and with this she closed her fan and pointed it at the audience, "In every story where I appear, I am the one who can tell the truth from a trick. Now, bring that playwright here!"

“We’ll bring him, all right!” volunteered the two actors. “He’s caused enough trouble for today.” And they stepped backstage, only to return pushing before them the same quivering, bearded fellow with great brown eyes who had approached them in the cafe. The actor announced with a flourish, “Here is the source of all our problems! He’s all yours. Dismember him, if you see fit, but please wait until he pays us.”

The characters formed a circle around the playwright, dancing raucously and moving closer and closer in toward him until they forced him to sit in one of the chairs, using their sashes and robes, and something that looked like a drop cloth, to tie him firmly down. Once he was imprisoned, they proceeded with their complaints.

“Look at me,” said the man holding his huge head, “How sick are you to have made me this way, or how sick am I to be your creation? Do you really think that knowledge has weight? Why didn’t you cut your own head off, instead of burdening mine with thoughts the gods never meant to disclose?” The bearded man uttered naught.

The little fellow with bandaged stubs then approached the playwright, making fists out of nothing and taking a boxing stance, but the queen restrained him, saying, “No violence yet. Let’s find out first how demented he really is.” The man with the bandages nodded in agreement, for clearly the playwright was very sick. The bearded man looked abashed, keeping silent while trying to wriggle his hands free.

“Enough!” intervened the king. “The playwright’s silence speaks volumes! He is guilty. And yet, why should we permit his silence to continue? Let’s ask him what is really behind his gloomy, miserable imagination. You, playwright, why did you write us?”

The bearded man could only shrug his shoulders, for how should he know? He gazed first at one character and then the next, around the circle, ending with an apologetic nod to the duo of actors standing beside the prompter.

“But we are not characters,” spoke the actress in defense, “We are real.” She turned to the audience and called out for emphasis, “You know we are real. Come and touch us!”

## *Refrain*

The king and queen regarded this display haughtily, “Well, if that’s all it takes to be real,” remarked the queen, “then the script is real too. Everybody, come touch it!” The king swept the battered script up from the floor and paraded up and down the stage, holding the script above his head. “This script is real, as real as all of you,” he hollered. The bearded man finally intervened with a hoarse whisper, “Is the script real then?”

“Silence!” commanded the big head, “You are worse than your creations. You should be punished, cut into pieces, thrown to the tigers, which in turn should be cut to pieces and thrown to the alligators, which in turn...”

“Why should we abuse him? Several of us are artists, after all,” said a respectable looking fellow dressed in a Roman tunic. He faced the audience and bowed, saying, “I am Noilamgyp, one of the honorable few who has a name.”

“What a dreamer,” answered a man holding a harp. “You think that because he gave you a name he respects you. In fact, he has no respect for art whatsoever. I ended up with a harp that doesn’t produce sounds!” The harpist plucked the strings of his harp, and no sound emerged. “See?” He rubbed his chin and added, “You know, I met a few more artists while I was in the book, and I think we forgot them there.” The harpist placed his harp by the playwright, snatched the script from the king and threw it back on the floor. He stepped inside, and a moment later a statuette protruded from the book, held up by the harpist who himself reemerged, followed by a dewy-eyed young woman holding a chisel.

He passed the statuette to her, scooped up the script and handed it back to the king. “Here is another artist that he created,” the harpist claimed, “and an example of fine carving.” He patted the young woman’s shoulder. He then turned to Noilamgyp and added, “And now, Mr. reversed Pygmalion, don’t you think that the playwright was cruel to make you choose between life and art? Why must we either be mistreated, or driven into solitude, or stripped of our creativity?”

“530, 531, 532...” panted an athletic young man as he ran out from

the book not far behind the harpist, stretching his arms toward the girl with the statuette.

“What are you counting?” asked the harpist in surprise.

“I’ve actually counted 533 apple trees! And I would like you to know that as an artist, I feel glad to have been written by this playwright. So far, I already have 505 more years to live, since I’m 28 at the moment.

“Rethink your glee,” replied the harpist with disgust. “He punished you just for being in love, and even for editing your own work. Look at you! He gave you a future by purloining your present. As far as I can see, for that playwright, death would be a light sentence.”

“Allow me to disagree,” chimed in Noilamgyp, “I thought and still think that I am a personality, for I have a name and a unique life.”

“But no palette, remember,” added the queen.

“At least you all read the book. Now, why don’t you calm down,” suggested the prompter, “and stick to the facts? And let me have that script back please,” he added, moving toward the king.

“Why? Why should you have it back?” asked the king, stepping back while holding on tightly to the script.

“Oh, please,” sighed the harpist, “We are nothing to him except the detritus of his sick imagination. Do any of you have a real name, a real life or even human features? When is the hour up?”

“Don’t even imagine hiring me again,” the prompter called out to the playwright. “You certainly haven’t managed this crowd right, nor your actors, nor your characters, and you’ve put me in an uncomfortable situation. After all, a prompter deserves to be treated with dignity.” With that thought, he let out what seemed to be a small sob of frustration and knelt down, comforting himself by hugging his knees.

Hesitantly, the playwright observed, “I don’t think I wrote that.”

“We’ve got him!” The king reveled in this twist. “He made a mistake. Let me just check in the script.” And with that, the king opened the book to investigate, while the other characters peered over his shoulders.

“Here it is,” read the king, “the prompter gets on his knees and appears to be crying, though he sheds not a tear.’ Hmm,” the king squatted

## *Refrain*

beside the prompter, "Let me see your cheeks please." He examined the prompter's face but seeing no sign of tears, ruefully added, "I'm afraid we didn't catch him after all."

"Enough!" said the prompter, referring to his stopwatch. "I need that script so that I can finish my role and go home. If you like it here, you can stay, but I've had enough. I was hired for one hour, and if my watch is correct, there are exactly five minutes left to that hour now."

"Like it here? Why, this theater is a postcard from hell!" cried the king. "I don't intend to stay here any longer than you." And with that, he tossed the script down, and put his slippered foot into it, commenting daintily as he prepared to depart, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am going back to my world." He did pause on the brink of the page, just for a moment, to add, "And what shall we do with that bearded man? Shall we leave him bound forever?"

"That's not a bad strategy," whispered the playwright, "Though I would still like to write your end."

The queen gave the playwright a good look up and down, "And then disappear into the book? No, I want to see myself what is going to happen to him."

"So take him with you," suggested the prompter.

Said the big head, "That's a fine idea; let's bring him along," and he started to untie the playwright, while the woman in the fig leaf began to push him toward the book. "This writer rolled my husband right down the mountain," said she, "So I know exactly where to roll him."

The playwright offered little resistance, though he did comment to the audience ruefully, "But I belong here!"

"Belong?" sang out the characters. "We guess that even your blood is imaginary! Into the book you go." And the king dragged the playwright's right foot into the first page, adding, "If your whole message is that there is none, then mine is that you belong right down here in the ink."

"No!" the playwright shouted, though he was quite helpless to resist. "No," he repeated, "I wanted my tales to mirror the stray word, just as it inches from the cartridge to the page."

The prompter while rolling his eyes whispered discreetly, “Please, try to make one sentence that makes sense.” Then he dove past the playwright into the page, and offered a hand in pulling at the playwright’s boots.

“But I mean it,” added the playwright, “I am the herald of silence.”

Perhaps the actors realized their own predicament, and sought the playwright’s companionship for the first time that day, for they reached out to try to pull him back, grabbing at his hands, but to no avail. He sank inevitably deeper into the page, his fingertips the last of him to show above the surface, leaving the actors and audience to mull over whether the event had really taken place at all. The rest of the characters, meanwhile, formed a line, and one at a time reentered the script, chanting and waving as they descended into that inky sea, “Write me, and your reader I will be.”





Born in Tunis in 1963 and raised in a traditional neighborhood, Karim Chaibi attended a French Jesuit school and later studied Islamic theology at the Zitouna University. While involved as a student in matters Islamic and political like many in his generation, Karim also developed a strong interest in the arts and avidly crafted original stories for friends in the Tunisian oral tradition. Karim left Tunisia in 1991 and has since adopted English, the flexible world language in which he now creates stories for a broader audience. As an adult, Karim also taught himself to paint. He has lived and worked in Tunisia, the U.S., Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Slovakia.