

THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS

*if it is not rectangular, then it is not square -
if it is not murderous, then it is not love -
if it is not tragedy, then it is not knowledge -
if it has no end, then it has no meaning.*

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In twelfth grade we learned the story of Sisyphus. A simple tale, and as a final assignment we were to draw new covers to replace the sad silhouette of a naked caveman pushing a squiggly arc across the face of our little paper books (even the rock seemed eager to escape such a banal existence).

It was in this vapid state which I found myself sitting before a drafting table under the late afternoon sun. At my hands rested a few blue pencils and a knobby gomme eraser already half-marred from graphite and finger sweat; above them a sheet of drawing paper half-illuminated by a blinding parallelogram of white light which shot through a square window above. Hands guided the sheet within the light, to which unseen extropy exhaled a cloud of parchment grains that mingled with dust bathing in the lucent prism between glass and wood. Feeling somewhat satisfied already, I lazily picked up a 2B and began to sketch a circle to the rhythm of my gently-nodding head.

The original idea was to make a perfectly round, centered circle—lacking somewhat in ambition, perhaps, but I wanted the observer to fill the void left by our utterly stilted archetype of the ragged Olympian who was locked away between my notebooks but still lingered like a bad taste (at this thought his hoary image wormed its way back onto my tongue; it tasted acidic, like parched soil). Anyway, I had learned long ago that inspiration is always grateful for a foothold, a trellis on which its vines may twine and climb.

The pencil dances timidly across paper leaving a light square in its tread. Four more quick flicks of the wrist and square turns to octagon. Eight becomes sixteen, then thirty-two, and already the circle begins to erode its boxy circumference; I try to gulp down some water but a still-warm pencil quickly crawls back into wanting fingers, and soon the rough circle is complete. With a mother's touch I pulled the now malapropos square shell out of the paper in a vagitus of dirty eraser shavings and loose graphite.

First freedom is quickly followed by a first yawn, and with it a first stretch: ah, that exquisite first stretch that slows down time and tears free all the tangled knots in our flesh, so lingering that even the slightest bumps on the newborn circle's surface continued to squirm with satisfaction well after I had taken a slow sip of water. One by one, each of these still-pulsing imperfections turned to smooth arcs, and with a fool's smile I leaned back against my chair reaching for the glass once more and closing my eyes—I say fool because as Hugo knew all too well, one is reassured as foolishly as he is alarmed (alas,

human nature is thus constituted).¹ Indeed upon a new inspection, the Shelleyan disfigurement of my improvised prosthetics becomes appallingly clear, and in spite of my hastened efforts to blend in new lines the defiant child shoves back against encroaching strokes and with fiendish laughter denies me the peace of an ideal shape. Eyes tiptoe around and around the edge of the circle as furrowed brows slowly crunch into a rigid squint ... but nothing was more blinding than the humiliation of a simple task, and my hands burned with the unspeakable torture of their impotence.² How was I expecting to make the circle mine if I couldn't even begin? What a joke this was becoming. I felt my calves jitter with rage.

by cutting down the self-growing first-fruits of the lurking serpent
as that plentiful crop of snakeheads grew spiking up.
If only he had done the killing alone!³

Suddenly—a tap on my right shoulder. Spinning around reveals a sturdy little Chinese woman standing behind me, eyes pursed like a cat and face wrinkled in an eternal frown, pensively looking at the disfigured shape. Turning back I feel my knees buckle as a metal chair presses up from under me: before my eyes no longer a table but a familiar clipboard leaning against the wall; a quiet symphony of sighs, distant coughs, the hum of humans breathing. Then a shrill voice in my right ear, ringing out blurred instructions ... I strain to listen, but without warning everything disappears as invisibly as it had presented itself, and my reflection off the room window stares blankly back.

‘Ay, what’s wrong with you!’ My mom’s vague reflection emerges among the shadows behind me and I turned around mouth dumbly agape. ‘We’re heading out now, I left some chicken in the oven,’ she said, ‘What are you doing?’ My mind was trapped in that

¹ « On se rassure presque aussi follement qu'on s'inquiète; la nature humaine est ainsi » Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (IV. 15, 1, 782).

² « Mais lui, tremblant encore, retombé à son silence, regardait le tableau sans répondre, d'un regard ardent et fixe, où brûlait l'affreux tourment de son impuissance. Rien de clair ni de vivant ne venait plus sous ses doigts » Emile Zola, *L'Œuvre* (II, 45).

³ « Ηρακλής πήρε όλα αυτά τα προβλήματα για να απελευθερώσει ένα μικρό ρυπαρό ρυάκι όπως η Λέρνα, περικοβάζοντας τα πρώτα φρούτα του φλερτάζου φιδιού Υδρα, καθώς αυτή η άφθονη συγκομιδή των σίδεων ξεφλούδισε » Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* (25. 196).

numbing limbo between processing her words and the work it had been immersed in, to which it knew it would soon return (even my body was awkwardly turned toward the wall between my desk and door), but after a short pause I reminded her of my assignment and she headed out laughing, ‘Didn’t you say nobody in your class can draw anyway? Stop wasting your time and go eat some food.’ Her tone was as patronizingly understanding as one trying to appreciate alien life, and I chuckled at how absurd the plight of the artist must appear to the audience unable to see the judge of the self always sitting amongst them.

In an attempt to forget this interruption, I drank some more water and gazed out into the grassless front lawn littered with leafless fig trees half-dead from the beating sun, with only a single white butterfly dancing on their graves: a hopelessly arid expanse my parents left to be remodeled last (how did I become so superficial?). I followed the bug’s fickle flight until it disappeared into the sight-shattering aura of the sun, and unfriendly eyes bounced back onto the page. Having already seen where each little bulge lay on the circle’s edge, my eyes took no time finding them again—but even calling what lay before me a circle seemed demeaning to nature, and I asked myself how it could be that just tracing an orange would have turned out a better result ... The thought of moving on flickered past my mind, as enticing as the the fresh bread wafting from the kitchen; but sulfurous fumes of burned paintings quickly reminded me that errors unfixed are not forgotten, that regardless of how glorious an edifice the architect can see nothing but the loose screw at its roots. And like a tower built on a loose screw, the masses are just as apt to blindly adore as they are to blindly scorn at its collapse. Thus I knew I could not continue until the circle was round once more.

Recalling some old advice which felt now like a child-sized crutch, I began to methodically turn the paper in right rotations, exposing basic gaps in my perception and resymmetrizing the circle which struggled helplessly to retain its wabi-sabi attitude. Once all the glaring imperfections had been silenced, I quickly span the paper another full rotation. No shrieks were heard, yet the smile of completion eluded me still. I roll the circle around again, this time slowly and deliberately, but found my mouth still stale with thirst; a

sigh barely manages to escape my momentary confusion, so short it could have been a defeated huff or simply a release of the drained breath I had been holding in. This thought quickly withered in my mouth and was shortly washed down in a gulp of water. The water was warm, and I wondered how such trivial nuisances could so quickly bury their roots in a parched mind.

Upon returning to my room I began pacing around the small confines to gather my thoughts, but really just to listen to the melodic clinks of crisp ice on glass, the occasional crackling of warm water breaking into the little glacier cubes. The sun no longer lit just my desk, having found a better angle of entry through which it could wash the entirety of my back wall in a juice of golden peach. Nevertheless it had lost no strength, and looking through the window branded little black circles which rolled across my vision. Thus I gave the sun my back to blind, looking instead over the portraits covering my wall.

At least, one assumed there was a wall behind the barely overlapping façade of finished sketches which left no patch of baby blue paint visible (if seeing is indeed knowing, then for all we know they could have been nailed into thin air). Each of these shared the same subject of Michelangelo's Pieta, and indeed foreign eyes could easily presume their ensemble to be a whimsically Warholesque collage of the same image over and over again—if there were any differences, they must have been contrived in the imagination of a madman, decipherable only through equally disturbed psyches. Yet when I looked upon the Virgin's before me, it was not so much with sight but with touch—as a friend once said of a Rothko: it was if my eyes had fingertips, and mine gently lifted each portrait out like a cube from among the rest, bathing it from all sides in a wonderful, fluffy country air which rustled her flowing robes and turned cold carrara into soft skin and holy cloth.⁴ If you felt her face it would be warm, and if you lifted the folds of her mantle they would feel heavy and thick—once seen in such dimensions, it was impossible to mistake any of the depictions for another. And if a silent stranger watched me scan these familiar faces, he would see the changes reflected in the color on the back of my eyes.

⁴ « Теперь он читал как бы в кубе, выхаживая каждый стих, приподнятый и со всех четырех сторон обвеваемый чудным, рыхлым деревенским воздухом » Vladimir Nabokov, *Dar* (1. I, 9).

For me, each of these chef d'oeuvres du jour was unique in the inspiration from which she was molded: a grotesque fusion of classical tenets of perfection with the fleshy features of my human companions, tainted with details I could only assume to be mine, all illuminated in the pale morning light in which I found faces most pleasant. On one, the pudgy cheeks and modest, oriental nose of my neighbor—her eyes would always open halfway upon resurrection but never followed mine; on another, a childhood friend, veiled in feathery, paper-thin drapery that billowed with every breath—touches that sent shudders through her frail limbs but were powerless to perturb the anger of her piercing black pupils; and on another, a paradox of waning eyebrows and curled lips born from hidden incubi, interné comme un mollusque but betrayed by thick, knotted black hair and a frantically-shaded gown.⁵ Put together, this holy harem could not count more than twelve Mary's among them all, and yet they already represented all human society; on one side envy, on the other disdain.⁶

In truth, the differences between all of the Madonna's lay in the flaws of their creator. Like different memories, they were both stained with fleeting sentiments and ingrained with sinister truths: the worst of my sins and the worst of theirs, twisting like bramble thorns around their hearts. Over time, these imperfections grew as inevitably as cracks in marble, as governed by the law of all cracks, and now in each figure's curling left hand I could grasp the particular nature of her creation, the precious and painful pocket each used to occupy in my mind prior to being pried out and pressed into paper ...

as a returning traveler sees in an orphan's eyes not only the smile of its mother, whom he had known in his youth, but also an avenue ending in a burst of yellow light ... and everything, everything.⁷

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *Le Spleen de Paris* : *Les Foulés*.

⁶ « Ces trois petites filles n'avaient pas vingt-quatre ans à elles trois, et elles représentaient déjà toute la société des hommes; d'un côté l'envie, de l'autre le dédain » Hugo, *Les Misérables* (II. 3, 8, 241).

⁷ « шестивенник видит в глазах у сироты не только улыбку ее матери, которую в юности знал ... и все, все » Nabokov, *Dar* (1. I, 10)

With age they had grown distant, attacked by new thoughts and new people who eagerly take their place, and indeed looking over each face I could not help but feel a common hatred in her eyes—some more than others, but all united in separation.

And yet, as I took in one final view of this wailing wall built from months of man-hours and jars of sweat and pyramids of pencils, I could not help but find the simple task before me at hand to be infinitely more difficult than any of the faces blankly staring down at my feet.

* * *

By the time I glanced back at my work, the circle had grown considerably in size. It stood stoic, seemingly magnificent, just beyond arm's reach. With confidence I stepped forward, raising my arm straight out only to feel my index finger instantly give way to a wall of invisible cement—a soft, sharp pop as I watched the first joint slowly bend upwards, carried by my forward momentum. A gasp, followed by a stinging bolt that coursed from my finger through my arm and into my chest. Suddenly propelled backwards, blinded by light or pain, I bent over clutching my left hand with wet palms to the sound of shattering glass.

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There exists a class of emotions so precious, so wholly welcomed and readily accepted that they function not as states of consciousness but rather doorways between a long, insofar–fruitless struggle and a future so just and palpable that it must be real. Indeed, one gets the sense in these moments that the soul reaches its slivery arms around the senses, snatching such sweets before the mind has time to even look down at the candy of its creation. Creative fulfillment is one of these imperceivable transitions (that of lust is another).

And so it is that I found myself with a lame left hand, lost in this land of light and fog with nothing but the clear outline of a circle and hot air seething through clenched teeth to remind me life was not over. My mind was replete with the novelty of a new world and any immediate physical pain quickly flowed over to a far–flung future. Once my composure returned, I noticed a slight breeze tickling the tips of my hair; the faint scent of metal and gunpowder drifted through air and got caught in the walls of my nostrils. Twitching my nose, I ventured a step forward once more: this time tentatively—imperceptibly, even, like the second hand of a mechanical watch, and no sooner had I raised out my right arm than main met mur in a chunky antinomy of cold sweat and dusty plaster. To my surprise, however, I discovered this wasn't a flat surface at all but instead one slightly convex! Prurient fingertips feel around the pasty imprint in wider and wider circles until I realized I was wobbling on the ends of my toes, hugging the rounded body to keep my balance as a powder–patina'd palm brushed over the top of what I knew now to be my baby sphere. Just to be certain, I walked in a circle around this transparent creation come to life; and indeed the sphere, seemingly perfect with the exception of a few extra–chalky patches furious fingers quickly rubbed smooth, stood before me like a mandate of god, as indifferent as it was beloved.

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All the powder that had been shed formed a little white cloud around my head; consequently, a flurry of involuntary coughs escaped me, and dusty air rushed in to steal what moisture was left in my throat. With wistful eyes I looked down, but all that remained of my fallen water was a small mosaic of glass shards and the faintest trace of a gray puddle. I looked at it as one looks upon the chalk outline of a corpse at a crime scene, and even this act of looking dried up the imprint further, as if my eyes were trying to suck out from the ground the memory of what I once held.

Misery never fails to find company, and I was quickly reminded of my throbbing index finger, still limp (although gravity had compelled the crooked tip to a more slightly bend) and already swollen up like a spoon. Afraid that I would run into the invisible sphere again, I immersed myself in the dull task of shading in its surface. Using the flat sides of my pencil to smear a loose layer of graphite across its body, and the sharp point to blend in the darker outline, time quickly regained its usual tempo and soon the sphere acquired a smooth and visibly-gray coat. Normally I would have drawn shadows indicating the position of a light source, but here the source was everywhere: from horizonless skies above to unblemished fields below, it touched every point to a white-hot glow and sucked rivulets of sweat from my face;

a few beads had already begun to wriggle free from tips of hair, pulling strands onto my forehead in thin bands.

I took a step back to look over my work, but immediately became aware of the danger waiting silently at my feet (Perhaps it could not hold in a gleeful hum at my imminent mistake!). Thankfully, my right foot was still an inch above the tallest arc of glass—however this step had also been too sure of itself, and feeling my unsupported body begin to tip irrevocably backwards both of my arms sprang out grabbing the sides of the sphere for dear life.

For a few moments I stood on my left heel holding this strange new balance. Heaving gasps echoed in my ears with the force of hurricane gusts, interrupted only by the thunderous cannon-fire of my thumping heart.

Still, I was uncomfortably aware that even the slightest betrayal by this sphere—of whose nature I knew so little—could release me to the shards below, already salivating for fresh blood. Anyway, my initial adrenaline had worn off and the surface of the ball was quickly becoming too hot to hold. Carefully I pulled my body forward, making sure to move my right foot outside their reach ... once safe, I quickly jerked myself upright and was stunned to feel the sphere almost imperceptibly budge backwards. Was this a taunt? Or the release of the fear that had been building in my mind? I gave the circle a push, one as heavy as I could risk without losing balance myself, but it stood as still as before. To be sure I leaned forward, planting my feet as far back as the glass would allow and pressed palms and chest into the ball with all my strength. A moment later I felt my arms suddenly loosen—the sphere gave a low grumble, and I watched dumbfounded as it rolled forward a few inches to a grinding halt. Gasps failed to fully express my shock, and I heard the words ‘what the’ escape with my hot breath (perhaps some others followed, but ears failed me after the second).

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It is well noted about despair that the feeling one sometimes gets of how his or her circumstances have dove to depths so perilous that they could not possibly fall any further, is nothing but an illusive ignorance of the chasms still waiting below (in fact, this belief in a state of ‘rock bottom’ often times leads one to stumble into precisely such unimaginable situations). And what is said about despair is equally as true for happiness and surprise, these other puppets of the human psyche. Perhaps mine was feeling particularly creative that day, for barely a few seconds after the words left me did I hear them repeated back. I would have believed this to be an absurdly clear and singular echo if not for the fact that they were uttered in a deeper, almost monotonous voice with a constant downwards inflection (as if angry) instead of the peaking emphasis I had placed on ‘the.’

It is in moments like these that fear, joy, and bewilderment come together and cry out in unison (maybe that is why the mouth becomes silent), and I felt how an infant must feel if three different people lifted their hands shouting ‘peek-a-boo!’ and revealed themselves at once: scared of the sudden appearance of hidden faces (and particularly the whites of their bulging eyes); delighted to receive such wide, loving smiles; and shocked by the still-foreign depths of the soul which pupils never fail to reveal. In my case, the differences were more subtle but their effect equally potent: the left jab of descrying a hidden observer when believed to be alone, then the right straight of having a new companion, and the finishing left hook of bringing something to life. Although the combo was inflicted in the mind (thus immobilizing and not toppling my body), I still felt the familiar, deafening ring between my ears and saw the same blend of blue, red, and green that came together in the deepest black of humility. All this transpired within the span of a blink but no detail was missed. And then blinding whiteness once more.

And if he were compelled to look at the light itself, would not that pain his eyes, and would he not turn away and flee to those things which he is able to discern and regard them as in very deed more clear and exact than the objects pointed out?

It is so, he said.⁸

I can only guess how long I stood planted at that spot, waiting for my vision to adjust so I could see again. Even shutting my eyes failed to bring relief, as they still clung tightly to the memory of that unseemly darkness. First to appear was the shape of the sphere itself which had once again assumed silence. Limitless sunlight from above shone much brighter than before, baking the air around me to an unbearable degree; even the vein in my left eye had begun twitching in distress—Oh, to die of the burning sun!⁹ Yet somehow the ground felt cooler, and I shuffled my feet to awake them. The question naturally followed: ‘Who are you,’ to which the same voice as before replied ‘Who are you?’, this time with a tone of sarcasm. Rather piqued, I asked if it was just going to repeat everything I say ... but the only response was my own sigh at its silence. At least it didn’t repeat me this time, I comforted myself. Yet despite pushing it a few more inches while blabbering random nonsense, it seemed the sphere had ended our conversation. I would have sank into confusion if not for the glaring whiteness at its bottom, revealing the area I had not yet shaded in exposed by its rolling. At this unpleasant sight the artist seized the reigns, and I rolled the ball until the curved border between gray and white lay conveniently at eye level. While I began to finish the basic shading from top to bottom in sweeping horizontal lines, pushing the sphere periodically to raise the remaining undrawn region, I soon discovered that once in motion it was much easier to roll, and by halfway through the rest of the work I had assumed a steady rhythm whereby one hand guided the ball at a constant pace while the other glided like the arm of a printer across the advancing surface. Once

⁸ « τί ἂν οἷε αὐτὸν εἰπεῖν, εἴ τις αὐτῷ λέγοι ὅτι τότε μὲν ἑώρα φλυαρίας, νῦν δὲ μᾶλλον τι ἐγγυτέρω τοῦ ὄντος καὶ πρὸς μᾶλλον ὄντα τετραμμένος ὀρθότερον βλέπει, καὶ δὴ καὶ ἕκαστον τῶν παριόντων δεικνύς αὐτῷ ἀναγκάζει ἑρωτῶν ἀποκρίνεσθαι ὅτι ἔστιν; οὐκ οἷε αὐτὸν ἀπορεῖν τε ἂν καὶ ἡγεῖσθαι τὰ τότε ὀρώμενα ἄλη θέστερα ἢ τὰ νῦν δεικνύμενα; Πολύ γ’, ἔφη » Plato, *Republic* (VII, 747).

⁹ « -- Безумец! -- сказал Пилат, почему-то гримасничая. Под левым глазом у него задергалась жилка, -- умирать от ожогов солнца! » Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita* (XXV, 319).

finished, I kept it turning for one more rotation, fixing any irregularities that had been overlooked.

Satisfied with this new state, I stopped and it continued rolling for quite a while, leaving a sparse trail of charcoal powder in its wake. Then the same rumbling, slowing to a crunch a few feet in front; yet when the sounds of friction stopped there was not silence but a quiet lapping right behind me. I spun around to see the same colorless expanse as before, but a faint pattern of ripples now snaked across its surface; the lack of shadows gave these slow, squiggly markings an ethereal, almost invisible presence, particularly as they faded away in what could have been a faraway horizon or simply cloaked behind layers of white fog. I stared harder and harder into the distance but was abruptly interrupted by a new, louder lap below me—looking down revealed a softer line extending beyond the eye's reach in both directions that separated the powdery earth I stood on from the translucent, smoothly-rippling curtain quickly advancing. And any doubt in my mind of this massive lake before me was erased by the pieces of broken glass which bobbed atop invisible currents at its edge.

Toes quietly slipped past this edge and felt the familiar, cool rush of water passing between them. It was so comforting a discovery that I stepped forward without any hesitation until both feet were fully plunged beneath the surface. Thirst and heat made the nature of the lake's existence too natural to be startling, and all I could think about was getting a drink: a task soon accomplished after crouching down and cupping a handful into a craving mouth. Blooming cracks on my lips stung from the water which tasted slightly saline, but I figured that was just the sweat and soot on my hands. This taste only deepened my thirst, and hands churning like a watermill in a storm splashed in gulp after gulp until I finally had to breathe out. Relief brought me to my knees, and I carefully washed my hands, face, and the still-searing back of my neck. Then leaning forward, I dipped my head into the clear, cool liquid and crawled like a salamander until I could flip myself around floating flat on its surface.

The sky still shone with blinding intensity but closing my eyes was bearable now, and a few good minutes passed before I felt my

heels bumping against hard ground. When I sat up I found myself right before the ball; bravely little leaping waves were kissing at its feet. Although my heart yearned to swim deeper into this saltless sea, I could not risk it reaching my sphere and dirtying both with pencil sludge. Soaked cotton and wet nylon clung to my skin and were still dripping madly by the time I reached the ball, pushing it with renewed energy until my palms were aflame and my forehead dry once more, and I was certain to have earned at least half an hour. Although a trail of muddy hand and footprints graced its surface and riddled the wobbly path I had made from the lake, the memory of the sea was beckoning irresistibly and no time was spared shedding shirt and shorts until I felt cold water once again rushing over my skin.

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It was only once I had lapsed back into a steady cadence of smooth, measured strokes did I begin to question the lake's sudden appearance (as well as mine). Actually, compared to my presence, that of the lake actually seemed logical: water had been spilled, after all, and at the time it did not strike me as odd that an infinite sea could be contained within the confines of a glass cup, so much deference did I have for the liquid of life—or just as one does not dare to question the origins of his savior (and I had no intentions of returning to the dry, dry heat).

‘We do not know the source of the Nile,’ Julien said to himself;

‘it has not been granted to the eye of man to behold the King of Rivers in the form of a simple stream.’¹⁰

The sphere’s materialization appealed instead to my ego: is it not the goal of every artist to breathe life, conscious thought into his creation? As for myself, reasons for existence were arriving in my thoughts with ease thanks to the refreshing lake–water, and I imagined myself as a lucid dreamer must feel in a fantasy not yet turned nightmare, with a new awareness of his control and the insurance of being able to wake up and leave at his leisure ... Yet why would I ever want to leave this world, this Eden of art studios with an unfinished piece before me, knowing there would be no road back? Ce n’est pas tous les jours qu’ on a besoin de nous.¹¹ The thought was so ridiculous it prompted a laugh, and I accidentally swallowed some water—even this was not disagreeable.

Meanwhile my legs had begun to feel tired and the white floor had turned dark from the depths. When I looked up, the horizon hid as ambiguously as before, except waves in the near distance appeared to have grown substantially in size and pace—I could see thin ridges of foam lining their falling crests, and could feel the force of the currents driving them tugging at my feet. Slowly I leaned back and began treading toward shore, carried comfortably along their flow, pressing my hair back and letting the pale fiery sky burn my upturned face. Whenever my eyes opened they reached into the invisible horizon grasping at distant waves, but in the same sleepy way that one looks into the never–ending darkness of a moonless midnight: with the naïve certainty of mind that there is nothing out there to see. At that moment a rogue wave broke through the water’s surface, so far away it was barely a flash in the corner of my eyes, but tall enough to snap them out of their spell. Righting myself I waded forward, squinting to see if this was another trick; the wave had already crashed but left unmistakable, foam–tipped spurts and splashes in its wake, and I

¹⁰ « ‘On ne connaît point les sources du Nil,’ se disait Julien; ‘il n’a point été donné à l’oeil de l’homme de voir le roi des fleuves dans l’état de simple ruisseau’ » Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir* (3. XLII, 509).

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, *En Attendant Godot* (II, 103)

watched in wonder as the little white-dipped rose sank back into the distant sea.

What luck this was, I thought to myself, and turned around to check my progress. The sphere looked about the size of an eyeball, still well away from the water's edge, and I curled my index finger and thumb around it in the gesture for 'okay;' the others resembled the perked eyelashes of a peacock. Back to swimming, I measured my distance from shore in the warmth of the water, and soon the grainy floor had risen to standing distance. This time the heat outside felt pleasant on my chilled viscera, and eyes gradually adjusted to the white-bright floor. When I finally opened them fully, though, I almost tripped back into the water: standing in front of my gray sphere the lit figure of a girl! Sadly, this all occurred in my mind—far too quick for a body retardé that did actually fall, sending my vision spinning back until water engulfed my face again. The nook of my head was only slightly slowed in the shallow water and promptly bounced off the lake floor, which hurt a lot but gave me convenient momentum to get back up as quickly as possible. Vigorously blinking to regain vision, I found the figure still standing unmoved before me.

'E— ?' I couldn't believe my eyes.

She looked down at me and laughed, 'Why'd you fall?' It must be her, the voice was true! And anyway, no one else would ask such a silly question ... I imagined my face must have been a perfect subject for a Chuck Noland portrait walking up to her, words failing me at every step. Was this another hallucination—had I drunk too much of the lake-water? Or perhaps a child of the sea, a footprint of my solitude, the devil herself ...

nor is it possible to describe how many various shapes affrighted imagination represented things to me in, how many wild ideas were found every moment in my fancy, and what strange unaccountable whimsies came into my thoughts by the way.¹²

¹² Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (XIV, 130).

My mouth was moist but I couldn't stop swallowing, and speech was impossible until I had walked right up to her, reaching a hand out to feel her arm—by which time her expression had changed from playful amusement to worried confusion. It felt as flatly smooth as ever—even the width was crafted with perfect accuracy. I looked back up into questioning eyes. 'Omo, what's wrong with you? Say something,' to which I took one last empty gulp before answering, 'How did you get here?' Reassured that I hadn't forgotten myself completely, her smile returned, this time with hidden ridicule, replying with a tsk and pulling her arm back. 'Don't do that, you're so wet. And stop asking stupid questions!'

I went over to my clothes which had toasted dry in the sun; the hot cotton felt like a warm blanket in a cold night even though the air itself was suffocating (albeit certainly cooler than before). While I dried myself I could observe her from afar: she had returned to looking up, short chin protruding from a pearl grey hoodie (hood pulled over yet sleeves rolled up) which gently fell over matching fleece sweatpants and the black, fur-lined slippers she had just bought. As I walked back her gaze remained fixed as she nodded upwards, 'Look at the moon! That's crazy how big it is right now.' I turned my head up patronizingly, already knowing those skies could offer nothing but the same, endless white as before. 'What are you saying? It's all bright out right now ...' as I trailed off she looked at me again with that concerned expression. 'Omo, I think you're going crazy.'

"Of course, of course," the Master said ironically.
"Now there are two lunatics instead of one!"¹³

She lifted my chin as if knowing my eyes had never really looked into the sky, and I kept them there for a few seconds of placation. The sky was still shining, still bright all over and rather irritating to stare at. 'Still no moon, but this is kind of painful,' I closed my eyes for a while to rest them, and eager to find some common ground I took her hand and spun her around to face the sphere behind us. 'What do you think

¹³ « -- Конечно, конечно, -- иронически заметил мастер, -- теперь, стало быть, налицо вместо одного сумасшедшего двое! И муж и жена. -- Он воздел руки к небу и закричал: -- Нет, это черт знает что такое, черт, черт, черт! » Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita* (XXX, 375).

of my ball?’ I smiled with lips pursed in anticipation as she looked it over, turning her head from side to side as if doing so would give a different perspective.

‘It’s a nice ball. Did you make it?’

‘Yep—that’s why I’m here, I think.’ We started walking over toward it, stepping along the graphite trail as I explained how I was rolling it earlier to keep away the water. At this, surprise returned to her: ‘It looks so heavy though, how’d you do that?’ Eagerly I let go and quickly paced the path remaining. The surface of the ball was less hot than I expected, and digging in my feet I began pushing it. By the time of her arrival she could no longer hold in giggles as a pale hand reached out caressing the sphere, still utterly unmoved. ‘Hm, I don’t believe you ... did you really push it all this way?’ At this point even my cheek was squished against the surface, forcing me to face her widening, incredulous smile. I forced a ‘yes’ through clenched teeth but all that came out was some hissing air. They had begun chattering as my whole body shuddered with effort. Beads of sweat began to dig out of my forehead, and with one last frustrated grumph I shoved the stupid ball and was surprised to feel the hard earth give way underneath my toes. Staggering backwards I stared at the sphere, panting with the fire of betrayal.

‘I don’t know why it’s not moving anymore!’ I had to speak between exhales, ‘It was so easy earlier, I don’t understand ... It was even talking to me!’ —I began to explain how it only repeated a few phrases is all, but before I could— ‘Omo stop, I think you really are going crazy! I’m actually worried, omo, omo ...’ And as much as I wanted to reestablish my sanity to her, my mind felt dizzy with confusion itself; possible explanations raced around too quick to catch: was it just being shy right now? Maybe I have to start by the water? Or what about the heat, the heat!

to take great pains not to lose either his control of the game,
or the viewpoint of the plaything—
but then to watch them escape altogether! Is there a worse fate?¹⁴

¹⁴ « Одновременно ему приходилось делать большие усилия, как для того, чтобы не утратить руководства игрой, так и для того, чтобы не выйти из состояния игрища. » Nabokov, *Dar* (1. I, 9).

Meanwhile she had found a comfortable seat leaning against the bottom edge of the ball. Once again looking up at the sky, eyes amazingly wide open while unthinking hands remotely reached into her kangaroo pouch emerging with a lighter and a green carton of menthol cigarettes. Still dazed by its disobedience, I continued searching in the sphere for some answers as she pried open the box and perched a stick on her bottom lip. Her eyes never wavered until they turned to mine, pricking my hand with another cigarette. It was a long, thin camel but looked fat between her thin fingers, and taking it to my mouth I collapsed, defeated, down against the ball next to her. As she reached the flame to my lips, I marveled at the natural ease with which she could live in the midst of such a storm of absurdity that continued to plague my spirit. Ignorance or acceptance, naïveté or knowledge I know not—but either way it was contagious, and with the first draw of cool smoke I couldn't help but feel a wave of calmness fall over me; I even began to ridicule myself for being so affected, and question whether or not all of this was really absurd at all.

Turning around she asked, 'So why were you so surprised back there?' So foreign was this newfound sense of composure that I didn't know how to respond, and a sly smile came over her, 'Are you scared of me?' Yes, I was indeed afraid—not of her but of the beast of insanity I was busy trying to strangle within me, to whom any logical response would have simply been a breath of fresh air. At last I managed a chuckle, 'No, just of your moon'—*la parole est donnée à l'homme pour cacher sa pensée*.

* * *

For a long while afterwards we sat in silence, alternating puffs of smoke while watching the edge of the lake ebb to and fro along the shore.

‘Wanna hear a joke?’

‘Yeah, tell me.’

‘There was once two prisoners, trapped inside the most hopeless and miserable prison in the land. They knew that there was no chance of being freed, and every day they were being tortured, so the two of them finally resolved to escape one night or die trying.’

A slow puff, holding in the smoke before breathing out.

‘At the end of their escape they came upon a wide gap separating the edge of their prison and the building next to it. It was the only obstacle between the guards behind them and certain freedom. The first prisoner starting running and leapt the whole way across, barely reaching the other side. But the second prisoner was afraid, and he looked down into the canyon which was so deep nothing could be seen below.

Another puff.

‘Determined to save him, the first prisoner broke off a large window from the building he was on, and laid the sheet of glass across the gap. The second prisoner laughed, since there was no way the thin windowpane would support his weight, but his companion explained: ‘Look at the reflection of the moon on the window! The moon is strong tonight, and if you make sure to only step on that your feet will never touch the glass.’

Another puff, even longer than the first, toying with my curiosity. I turned to look at her.

‘The second prisoner was still scared, but thought about it for a while. The moon was indeed bright and full that night, and they could hear the prison guards climbing up the final set of stairs. He suddenly became very angry and said, ‘No, you will just block the moon with your hand right before I step on it, and I will certainly fall to my death!’

At this she laughed to herself, as if finished. But I didn’t understand. ‘So what happened?’

Another puff.

‘The guards reached the roof, and the second prisoner quickly stepped onto the moon’s reflection. The glass broke, and he fell to his certain death.’

Silence resumed. When we had finished our first cigarette she handed me another. ‘So do you really not see the moon right now?’

I looked up and the sky was still lit in every direction, although it did seem ever-so-slightly dimmer.

‘No,’ I sighed, ‘I don’t see a moon.’

* * *

By the time my eyes opened again the light was disappeared. Indigo darkness had fallen over the land and even the sea in front of me was shrouded in an azure blackness, existing solely in the soundless hushes of waves which bobbed my right arm frozen from inertia—actually, that was just the slumbering shrugs of E—’s shoulders. Trying to wriggle my limbs only compelled them to prove their numbness them further, yet I had not even been asleep! ... This I knew—it was not the daze of rest I felt within me but instead peaceful pain: as if a dozen strong hands had overturned and unstitched me from top to bottom, nimbly slipping inside to squeeze my heart. Indeed lack of sleep was perhaps the only thing I knew anymore: this strange churning inside me, this newfound darkness (the passing of time, perhaps?), this life beside me were all still too surreal to approach with sanity.

I could turn my head now, but even it was numb with a thousand soft needles. Turning around I realized this was actually her fleece sweater become makeshift pillow in a sad attempt to cushion

the stony headboard behind us. Since I had not slept, the memories of daytime were still fresh in my mind; standing out was the disobedience of the sphere, and my inner restlessness quickly took form in a determination to dispel her disbelief. Taking her head and the rolled up hoodie, I turned her down onto the ground as gently as my still-insubordinate arms would allow; they let go a little too early, but thankfully the ground moved like soft sand now—as if the water had been slowly soaking through—and darkness had not brought along its icy companion but simply quelled the daytime swelter to a balmy summer dusk.

Wobbling legs brought me back up. Wide pupils could perceive now the pale crescent of her silhouette, and I turned back toward the sphere. My earlier shading made the ball ever so slightly blacker than the shadows behind, and its surface felt cool to the touch. ‘You again’ I whispered, blowing tiny flecks of graphite onto my hands, waiting to see if the comrade had found his voice. But still nothing. There were no witnesses this time around but I felt my frustration resurfacing nonetheless, it slammed my body into the ball like a battering ram: backwards I recoiled in pain, and with a wretched howl watched the sphere do the same.

Lazarus renaissainte! A roar of triumph erupted from my scowl but I caught it at the tip of my tongue, making sure no sound was let out; the glory of victory was thus dispersed in a roaring breath of hot air, and I quickly glanced down to make sure she hadn’t been woken up (was this really out of concern for her sleep, or fear that she would discover my surprise too soon?). Likely the latter, for even as I looked back at her fading image the promise of a ball pushed further was too compelling to resist.

Sad and cheerful I enter, sculptor, your studio:
So many gods, and goddesses, and heroes!
Here is Apollo-ideal, there Niobe-grief...
I find it cheerful.¹⁵

¹⁵ « грустен и весел вхожу, ваятель, в твою мастерскую: ... Сколько богов, и богинь, и героев! ... Тут Аполлон-идеал, там Ниобея-печаль. | Весело мне. » Alexander Pushkin, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii* (iii / 1. 416). Author’s emphasis.

Cheerful indeed—any thoughts still tethering me to her presence could find spark only behind the fervor that continued driving my sphere. By the time I stopped to take a breath, her silhouette had long fallen back amongst the shadows of the sea and sky behind me, her quiet breathing long drowned amongst the soft splashes of waves unseen. Ambition made the trek back along the ball's slightly sunken path impossible, or just ridiculous beyond my spectrum of contemplation dominated solely by the vision of an unmade path onward. Even though eyes continued to acclimate to the darkness there was nothing beyond the sphere to be seen, and as night consumed everything else in view I found it to be all I needed. How wonderful it would be, I thought, if I woke her up upon daylight to a ball completely disappeared, leaving nothing but a gray-freckled road reaching into the infinite distance ... such faux hopes pulled me forward with new enthusiasm.

As with all worldly endeavors, my absorbance in this sole task soon stripped time of all its meaning. However in doing so, one's mind cannot help but build hope for some radical change in his or her surroundings by the time daily consciousness reawakens—some delight-inducing sign of all the time that has truly elapsed during its slumber. Unfortunately for me, however—despite refusing to turn my gaze away from the sphere's rolling center—returning awareness was greeted not with the fulfilled promise of broad daylight but instead the same (if not darker) night shrouding my sight. This awareness reminded me of E—, and eyes flicked upwards searching for a moon that still evaded their grasp; it brought back as well the silent sloshing of lake-water, more poignant than ever after a season of nothing but quiet crunching. Rather disappointed, I resumed rolling the ball and observed the dying reverberations of waves dancing in my mind: for a moment they all shifted to my left ear, then promptly bounced across to my right ... and then back to the left, where they persisted softly. With cool, moist earth pushing up between my toes and a sultry breeze wiping my sweat, all had fallen into place—even the shadowy unknowns seemed to urge me onward, and I gladly obeyed until a rocky bump abruptly stopped me on my path, sending my smile straight into the sphere.

Actually it was just the tip of my nose, and I heard a loud gasp escape from the soft crunch of cartilage on rock. Even more frustrating than the pain searing through my nose was the sudden appearance of this unforeseen impediment, and with I vengeful shove I forced the ball onto and over the bulbous lump. Then another gasp—but this time it wasn't mine ... wait!—at once a piercing scream shattered the silence, and I stepped back in horror seeing the surface of the sphere drip with black blood. And that scream—a voice I recognized instantly, it was her's!

|||

And now came the second strange thing...

He suddenly stopped hiccuping, his heart thumped and dropped somewhere for a second, then returned, but with a blunt needle stuck in it.¹⁶

When my mind finally returned limping and hunched, having gone down every nook and cranny in the cavernous network of horrible decisions and horrible possibilities that had suddenly opened wide within my mind, and having found nothing but a terrifying beast or a rock wall at each's end, I climbed out to see the same sight as before. Her scream had just broken off but the current continued to echo her pain. I could clearly see the writhing shape of a figure on the ground, with the exception of her legs bestrewn black from spurting blood. Indeed, it seemed they had been crushed away altogether if not for the gruesomely snow-white splinters of bone protruding out from amongst quickly flowing shadows. At another, calmer, time I might have studied such a spectacle for a post-modern, marble-and-tomato juice fountain design—however in the moment, all I could think of was cleaning the wound (somehow it was reassuring to feel human again). Searching for some vessel I found only her hoodie, and shaking legs stumbled me to the water's edge; I pushed it into the lake and ran

¹⁶ « Тут приключилась вторая странность, касающаяся одного Берлиоза. Он внезапно перестал икать, сердце его стукнуло и на мгновение куда-то провалилось, потом вернулось, но с тупой иглой, засевшей в нем. » Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita* (I, 4).

back to squeeze the remaining contents over her shins. For an instant, patches of paleness returned allowing me see her trembling legs, but these were soon covered afresh by thick black gushes; once again I went to wet the sweater, quicker this time around, and squeezed it roughly over her gaping mouth. Her cries were seen but not heard, and I wished desperately to say that she was going to be all right but unfortunately, stupidity is far too honest and straightforward for such philosophies.¹⁷

Scarlet spectres fluttered before my eyes ... two medics pushing down on a ghastly stomach wound already spurting with intestines, while raining bullets of blood and shrapnel drowned their dying howls ... in a sudden moment of clarity I tore off my shirt and stuffed in in her mouth. Not wanting to waste any time, nor risk jittery hands from attempting self-control, I pushed the soaked sweater out from under her legs, dragging out a red and black mud in the process and hastily wrapping its sleeves around the top. As soon as the knot was pulled around her bones my ears were cracked anew with a sickening scream, so deep and rattling it ripped apart the last shreds of sound in her throat. Salty tears seeped between my lips, stinging a teeth-torn tongue within; I ran back deep into the lake thrusting my head into the water. With each deep gulp of water the visions slowly washed away, only to unveil viridian seas of guilt underneath. Had I really been tricked into walking in a complete circle? It would appear so. Or had I instead completed a full circuit around this world ... *primus circumdedisti me*. I cursed the stars for not giving me guidance. Then I cursed myself for not drawing a distant marker in their absence. The guilt was too much to bear—my mind was quickly becoming nauseatingly light, glassy emeralds boring into eyes that bled new tears ... But what next? If this was indeed a dream—my dream—then her screams would be all just in my mind; her pain, in my legs. And what then, I wondered as I tried desperately to drown myself ... if I knew how to leave this world I would have already. Violently coughing I stood back up, looking back eyes hopeful that her apparition had disappeared. But it had simply turned silent.

¹⁷ « А во-вторых, опять-таки чем глупее, тем ближе к делу. Чем глупее, тем и яснее. Глупость коротка и нехитра, а ум виляет и прячется. Ум подлец, а глупость пряма и честна. » Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (2. V. 3, 313).

What was startling, however, was the sudden appearance of blood spattering stuck on the shadowy skies beyond! Dripping blotches joining together in the vague shape of a veiny mountain peak. As I walked closer they fused further, like a Rorschach mask floating in the distance, yet all my previous ruminations eased me into the perception that this was all some test of my resilience. No longer burdened by her cries of pain, selfish thoughts returned to me—the scarlet of her blood into a luxurious velvet of lofty inspiration. Even as I reached the sphere my eyes were unable to turn down at her still corpse, unable even to look at the fascinating triangular pattern of black blots on the sky: rather they were drugged by fresh air and revelation, consumed once more with the image of a ragged man forcing his ball up the slope—yet this time, it was not a slope but the teetering tip of a summit, and atop a mountain not of stone but flesh, and driven not by a struggling olympian but by me! As my eyes dug deeper into this fantasy they whetted the apex to a point so piercing it cut open the sky. Out poured a rosy glow lighting up the edges of every detail, and the idea stood amongst the shadows clearer than ever: my creation finding completion as the eye of providence, suspended in a state of Mondrian immobility as impossible as a hovering raindrop, forever held between left and right, blood and dust, heaven and sin ... Such a vision was so glorious it seemed I had already half-attained it, as if I could see now the angel trapped within the marble—and all that was left was to carve him free. How beautiful and blinding pride can seem!

Could this possibly be, I thought, the happiness that Camus' tragic hero found upon finally reaching the peak? But who had he sacrificed to discover it? And which way does the ball roll back down soon after? Suddenly my eyes caught a white butterfly fluttering in the distance. It lifted my spirits to meet their reflections floating above, and I resolved in that moment that I had at last discovered the true purpose of this journey—to return to the mountain its lost child, and to put my soul to peace. Maybe then I can finally wake up.