Josephus

By: Benjamin Stecher

I wrote this story when I was 25 years old while working as an English teacher at an after school academy in Sacheon, South Korea. It was an idyllic setting, nestled in the hills of South Gyeongsang province. During the mornings and weekends, often with a notebook and pen in hand, I'd roam those hills and write. This story is what spilled out.

Chapter 1

Because nothing's worse than being bored

Joseph was bored, bored and restless, it's bearable to be bored and tired but to be bored and full of un-aimed vigor is stifling. And so he sat for a while pondering all of the different ways with which he could pass his time. Thinking he would go outside and make use of this energy he picked up his basketball and headed for the playground. The image of a twenty eight year old man playing basketball in a park by himself flashed before his eyes but he shook it off as he slipped on a pair of shorts and dug his sneakers out of a closet. Moving towards his front door he heard the grim patter of raindrops outside and his feet came to a stop. He let out a sigh and trotted back over to his living room couch to lament some more.

Lying on his couch with his shoes still on throwing his basketball up and down a series of suggestions came to him. He could go back to his computer? No, he already

spent most of the morning there. Make some food? Not hungry. Call a friend? Not in the mood to talk. Do some cleaning? No, no, no.

Having seemingly squandered all options available to him he decided to turn on the television and waste what time he could basking in its glowing rays. He flicked through the channels, skipping past dramas, commercials, baseball games, talk shows and sitcoms a number of times through before realizing that nothing on TV could satisfy him.

He sat up and stared impassively ahead of him. A fly buzzed past his ear inciting no reaction in our stale observer. The space between his calf and his shin itched and he found himself thankful for the few moments of distraction it brought him, letting the sensation linger for a few seconds before succumbing to its temptation in what might have been the best part of his day thus far.

He slumped back and peered up at the ceiling, ugly gray stucco stared back at him. Moving his gaze slightly he saw a mark on the ceiling, the cause of which he could never know, he stared and thought of how long it may have been there, unattended to…..longer than him perhaps.

Rising to his feet he moved towards his little window and peered out into the world. The rain was heavy and cast a menacing shroud over the scene. He traced drops of water as they traversed the concrete lines before plunging down into the sewer system below. How convenient it is to have water wash itself away for us, in the morning hardly a trace of it would remain. Joseph gazed out into the apartment across the way, it too playing captive to many a soul who dare not trifle with nature's wrath.

The rain had lulled him to sleep and he slumped back over to his couch to nap. Lying down he closed his eyes as an image of a childhood friend popped to mind. He and

Jameer had spent nearly the entirety of their elementary school days together playing baseball and running around golf courses. When it came time to go to high school their families had chosen different schools and their friendship dwindled before eventually fading out all together. Joseph thought about what he might be doing and how their lives would stack up against one another, the thought of it discouraged him and he rolled onto his side, when he did so he saw that propping up the stand that his television rested on was a weary looking book. He stared and wondered what it could be before allowing curiosity to get the better of him.

He moved upright and sauntered over towards the stand, lifting it just enough to give him the room he would need to slide the book out from underneath before allowing the stand to rest at a tilt. He turned it over to the front only to see that the cover, along with the first few pages, had been ripped off. He examined it some more in an effort to determine what it was or who its author may be but the only conclusion he could draw was that it was a collection of short stories. Once he realized that whatever it was he had not read it before he opened up the pages and landed upon a story called Nevsky Prospekt, the only story still completely intact.

He read it in a single sitting and was completely enthralled. He shot to his feet and burrowed around his house trying to see if there were any other books lying in wait for him. All he found was a little old bookcase that contained nothing but a collection of medical journals. He thought for a few moments about what he should do before realizing that he had to go to the library. Upon coming to this conclusion he felt a rush of excitement creep through his brain to his heart and finally to his legs, which picked up the

rest of his body and scurried it out the door, though not before properly bracing himself for the rain that waited.

The walk gave him the first opportunity of the day to look over the clothes that he was wearing. A remark his grandfather once made sprung to mind ‘Joey, you’re going to die with two million dollars in the bank and one pair of socks’. His gray sweatshirt had grown coarse, his jeans needed to be washed, and the soles of his shoes needed to be replaced. Sighing he shrugged forward and before long found himself standing amongst the giant stone pillars of the public library.

He spent the first few minutes gazing around at the marvel of literature that engulfed him. Books about war, books about science, books about art, books about books, the sheer gallery of topics took him aback, his indecisive nature didn’t help matters and lead to him roaming around the aisles like a stray puppy. Finally he found himself in the fairy tales section and opened up a book called *The Great Tales of Franklin Scott*. Its simple bindings, modest cover art, wide margins and luminous title fit his appetite. Opening its pages he found a story called ‘The Folly of Inequity’, a mere five pages long, set in heavy font. He usually didn’t read anything that he had scarcely heard of before, nonetheless he dove in….

He awoke, a startled little shrewd full of inequity and malice for the dreams that had long since passed but whose hope still encapsulated his being and tore him to pieces at every opportunity. Little did he know that this day, May 18th in a year that didn’t matter, would be the last day he ever lived.

It was 8:14am when Cadfree Walker first opened his eyes to the world. He lay in his bed for roughly an hour, contemplating whether or not to get up, and what he would do if he ever did get up. Once he knew that he had laid in bed long enough he got up, though still not sure where the day would take him, he proceeded to walk down the stairs to his laboratory and stare at the chemicals he had left festering from the night before. He looked at them for a while, making mental notes about changes in viscosity, luminosity, transparency, and all the other words he remembered from his textbooks. But the chemicals had not changed in the manner Cadfree saw, soon he would know this too.

All his life he had an affinity for the sciences but thought it unwise to apply himself to it at school believing that the teachers he had had would never be as good as the books he could read on his own. So he studied it, independently and with an adequate, though certainly not exceptional, amount of fervor. His failures began to deceive him, he believes himself to remember a day when he was oh so close to discovering a revolutionary type of eulanium that was more resistant and more pliable then all others that existed.

It was this day when Cadfree would realize in full the folly of his pasts. He had always known the risks he was taking by not pursuing the study under a more academic guise, nevertheless, he adamantly believed himself to be in the right and negated any omission as a mere lack of understanding by others. These thoughts produced a cycle of joy and sorrow that spiraled around his head for the rest of the day before finally siding with the rest of them and concluding that his whole life had been a mistake. He looked again at his simple chemistry experiments in the basement, pressed his finger to the trigger of the shotgun in his hands, and blew his fuckin brains out.

As Joseph slowly closed the book he thought to himself ‘happy endings never fill a thirsty soul’. He repeated these last words out loud, thinking quite fondly of himself for having thought them.

Within a few moments he was perusing the section of the library titled modern philosophy, reminding himself not to get too in over his head, at least not all at once, something that would inspire and motivate while dealing with a topic that he perceived himself to know adequately, though not fully. And so it happened that he found himself flipping through the pages of a book called ‘The Divine Beauty of Athleticism’, before reason could take hold of his decision he started reading as he stood from its beginning.…

There are things in our world that are to be passed over, and others which are to be admired. Some choose to place them not in a natural hierarchical order, but rather in an obscure and deviant harmony among all things. To be unable to say that one thing is better than another is as foolish as one who is blind to the fact that three of a given thing are more than two of that same thing.

Art is nothing more than a manifestation of human appetites, whilst athleticism and all of its forms is a manifestation of the human form. The distinction thus seems to boil down between the soul, representing art on the one side, and the body, representing athletics on the other. However, this conclusion was drawn as a result of itself jumping to conclusions, we must then begin an analysis of why art is relative to the soul and body of the athletics.

A definition must be drawn of all parties involved. The first relationship to be examined is that of art and the soul. Art is humanity's attempt to put itself and its surroundings into perspective. The artist, whether he be an interior decorator, sculptor, painter, or poet, is recreating that which already exists, by that is meant that the artist is merely trying to create a real world manifestation of an object, image or stanza that exists for the moment only in the mind of the soon to be creator. The build up of anxiety between the moment of realization of the piece of art in the brain, to the moment that the last stroke has been applied to the canvas, is where the idea becomes art. Up until the moment of conception, it thought of itself never to have been, and never would have been had the artist never dreamt it. From that instant of realization is where the truest sense of the beauty of art can be found, for the end piece is nothing more than a copy of the first moment of conception, and it is from that instant to the moment of its completion that the artist's skill is put on display. However, the best will have done nothing more than recreate that which was perfect. The labor required to do so is often painstaking, the mental strain must be hard for any and all who attempt to do so to bear, thus few among us possess the skills needed just to come close. Those who come the closest are to be the most admired.

The next attempt will be far more difficult and possibly too much of a task for me to be able to conquer with words, but to do so I will try, that being the source of artistic intellect, the soul. It would be ridiculous to try and come up with some gaudy definition of what the soul's function is and how it manifests itself in the world that we know of. We are not endowed with adequate strength nor capacity to make a decent attempt. The only thing that I will try and point out is what is alive in the absence of the body.

For as long as humanity can remember, it has been drawing for itself a distinction between the body and the soul. I can only pity the first poor fellow who came to the realization that such a dichotomy was possible, for it must have tortured his dreams and left him breathless in the clearest of airs. How does one begin to try and make a distinction for himself between where his body ends and his soul begins. Over time it seems to be coming clearer that to try and define the distinction is both nonsensical and irreverent. The best promulgated of such attempts are crowned as religion. And among the various religions are various distinctions about the existence and place of the body contra the soul.

Joseph flipped forward a few pages and read…

The distinction arises from the fact that athleticism requires no perspective, it is not trying to portray a view of anything, it is merely trying to create something in it of itself and needs no conception of external reality to do so. The artist weaves from the mind, the athlete molds together animal instincts with human will, all encased in a body that …

He stopped there and read no more of the book, while it had peaked his interests as both a fervent spectator and a renegade connoisseur, it did not sustain him. Besides, while reading the last piece he had made up in his mind on what to read next and bent towards it.

He had always loved travel and when the thought of it flashed in front of him he knew he had to indulge. He decided to look for a travel journal, a piece of personal exploration, a humble adventure. He wasn't exactly sure where he would be able to find such a story, but after enlisting the help of the sweetly librarian he found himself staring at an unknown biography. Without Joseph getting a chance to catch the title the librarian flipped it open to page fifty two and promised him that he would not be disappointed. The only hint the woman had dropped was that it was set in Africa and written by a young man just a few years prior. Joseph was skeptical but put faith in the old woman's charming face and the interest he had always had in the Dark Continent. With that thought he opened the pages, and began to read…

Arrival

We landed in a haze, the African sun had just set as we were being rushed through a haze of pesky baggage handlers and taxi drivers onto our first tro-tro(mini-bus). Some crappy Nigerian soap opera was blaring as we set off for a four hour ride from Accra(capital) to Kumasi(second biggest city). Our first stop came in the middle of the night in god-knows-where, Ghana. I remember seeing what looked like a deserted two story building, little did I know that the power was just out for the night. We stood by the Tro-tro as people passed and stared in bewilderment at the bus full of white people.

Kumasi

It took a long time to adjust to the conditions of the GuestLine lodge in Kumasi, sharing a decrepit looking room which was divided by a wall that jutted out to ¾ length, on the other side was the bathroom with a working shower (as opposed to the bucket showers we would get used to) and a toilet that flooded the first time I used it. The conditions were more than bearable considering what lay ahead.

Kumasi was everything I expected an African city to be, open sewers lined every street, foul smells of burning garbage, human waste, and diesel fumes floated through the air, people making homes out of every nook and cranny, animals wandering around trying to survive in a place where wildlife just shouldn't be. Across the street from our lodge was a construction site where pillars had been erected and supposedly a building was in the process of being built, we came back to the same spot four weeks later only to find that little to nothing had progressed.

We spent a day wandering through the main market in Kumasi, I never really knew what to expect from hell till I came here. We were told that it was the second biggest market in West Africa, behind one in Lagos, however I became skeptical of any such statistics in Africa as it's hard to believe that anyone actually keeps accurate records of such things. I estimate it to be roughly two kilometers squared, though I could be completely off, centered around a half kilometer squared area that comprised its heart. It was split up into columns and rows of huts that each sold an odd mishmash of items. There were double lane walking paths that separated the shops, a space that should hold no more then two to three people at a time was often crammed to excruciating levels. Oh, and don't ever forget the heat, we were there during the supposed rainy season when the temperature apparently cools off a bit, it took me three weeks before I could walk around

without sweating and stuck to my bed almost every night. Almost anything imaginable can be found being sold here, from a severed and embalmed cow's head, to an assortment of live animals, to radio's, cd's, dvd's, toilet paper, clothing, and even babies. Just joking on that last one….. I hope.

The city also had a rather well developed area of town close to our lodge where you can eat at a western restaurant, watch television in the air conditioned British embassy, go to the internet café, and get hassled by local artisan merchants.

On the day we had planned to leave, nine of the twelve of us were struck with a terrible illness when we learned that eating fried rice from an old street vendor's bucket isn't as good of an idea as we might have thought.

Travel North

The next day we left Kumasi and headed for BulgaTanga, the capital of the Upper East Region. The ride was going well, despite the crack running lengthwise through the middle of the bus that slowly seemed to be getting bigger and bigger as we bumped along. We hit Tamale(third biggest city) and the engine began breaking down. We had to get off, and wait in the dark, mosquito riddled bus stop, which was really just an empty field with a couple fuel tanks and even though night had fallen it was still uncomfortably hot. After a lengthy delay we got back on the bus and headed for Bulga where we spent the night, woke up the next morning and then looked for an internet café for an hour, got pointed in the wrong direction three separate times in an hour before winding up in the same spot we started and finding out there was an internet café 5 minutes from where we

had begun, suffice it to say, I don't think the locals take enough advantage of their internet.

Sandema

We spent the next three weeks in a small town in the Upper East Region called Sandema. The people in town speak Buli and are the only people in the world that speak the language, if you walk five kilometers outside of the town they will be speaking a new language, such is the way things are in Africa. We went to Sandema with the goal of helping in the construction of a new children's centre for a foundation called horizons children's centre started by a woman from Toronto to help impoverished and often orphaned children of Ghana. They currently have 20 or so children in their care whom they provide shelter for, feed, and pay for their schooling. They spend their days going to school, cleaning, doing homework, and of course, playing football.

One day the bike I was riding broke down and I took it into town to get it fixed by the local bike repair man. I left the bike with him and walked across the street to watch children pester a monkey tied to a poll. I returned an hour later to see him finishing up, asked him how much it would cost and he replied by saying 2000 cedi(roughly 25 cents). I paused for a second as at first I thought I had misunderstood him considering he only wanted 25 cents for nearly an hour's worth of work, but no, it was just Africa.

The actual construction did not go as we had planned, we had been told that the foundation had already been made and that the bricks were ready to be laid. We got their and found an empty field where the beginnings of a building was supposed to be. Construction in Ghana, which I imagine is pretty typical of most of Africa, is a frustrating

and slow process, their construction plans were for a simple building, one story comprising four wings and a central area, no more then two to three thousand square feet, they believe it will take them five years to finish it, which sadly enough might be an ambitious estimate. It seemed as though every day there was a new excuse as to why we could not build; 'it might rain', 'it's too hot', 'the cement hasn't arrived', 'we can't get the wheelbarrow to deliver the wooden sticks', ect. Construction itself is almost 100% manual labor, five or so day laborers had been hired to build, which while we were there included making bricks and digging the foundation with picks and shovels, back breaking work to say the least. We helped when and where we could, although we had neither the stamina nor the know-how to really be that effective. Instead we tried to help in other aspects of life, we built the children a tire swing, painted a mural, bought them soccer nets(to replace wooden sticks), and jerseys(which often replaced nothing but yellow underwear). Despite the construction setbacks, we left feeling as though we had made a positive contribution to the lives of these children.

The food in Sandema was much like the rest of Ghana, awful. For the first week we had one of the local women cook all of our meals for us, which usually included rice, some kind of meat(usually goat), and little else. We also ate our share of banku, the local specialty, made from cassava that has been ground up for hours until it becomes a doughy paste. It's really starchy, and smells like a sewer. When we moved into our own place in Sandema we decided to do the rest of the cooking ourselves and managed to make some edible meals despite the limited supply that was available on market days.

One of our days was spent in Paga, a small town just outside the Burkina Faso border. There we partook in the local tourist traps, feeding live chicken to

crocodiles and going to a site that once was a slave market. Our guides were people that seemed to just be there at the time we showed up and thought they could make a little money if they showed us around.

Travel

The last two weeks of the trip were spent racing around the country trying to take in as much as possible. It began in Mole National Park. The ride took four hours despite it only being 80 km long, you could tell that some time ago someone had tried to make it into a real road by laying dirt along it, however it had not been maintained and the dirt molded back into the shape of the terrain lying beneath it. We got to a small town just outside of Mole before the rear axle of the tro-tro fell out of place. Thankfully the bus that passes through the town once a day was passing by and we managed to stop it, quickly haul our luggage from the tro-tro onto the bus and continue our journey.

Mole park has a couple herds of elephants, a few big cats, and a number of birds and small game. We were told that there was a chance that we may not see much of anything as we were only going into the park for a few hours. After an hour we had had our fill of deer and warthog when suddenly an African elephant crossed in front of our path roughly two hundred meters ahead. We quickly jumped out of the truck and pursued the elephant from a safe distance, it eventually led us to a watering hole where we stumbled upon a herd. We stopped and stayed in that spot for roughly an hour as we watched the elephants swim, wash themselves, drink, and play around. We were all eager to get as close as possible to them but the guide forcefully reminded us that these weren't

exactly tame animals. This was the Africa you picture in your dreams. I've seen elephants like these before in zoos, but there is nothing quite like seeing them interact with each other in the wild. One of those sights language isn't quite suited for capturing.

We left the park at midday and headed for a nearby village called Larabanga, easily the most underdeveloped place I had ever been. The vast majority of residents were subsistence farmers that survived by bartering with each other. The women shuttled two kilometers, four times a day just to bring back heavy buckets of dirty swamp water to town so the residents have enough to clean, bathe, cook and drink from. The visit also coincided with a stomach bug I was experiencing, something quite common in Africa, however it was picking a rather bad time to rear its head. The facilities in Larabanga being what they were often left me choosing the forest instead of the toilets, however I did use them on one occasion and made the mistake of sitting down…I had a rash for the next four days.

From Larabanga we traveled to Kumasi and then Cape Coast/El Mina where we spent three days exploring the sites including historic slave castles, beaches, some nightlife, and a bustling fish market. The fishing was really the main attraction, at times it seemed like the practices implored hadn't changed in hundreds of years. Large crews of men, some fifty strong, would line up on a beach, dig themselves into the sand and begin hauling in giant nets cast ½ a kilometer out. It took them almost two hours to haul in a single load which often didn't catch much more than a few elongated fish that looked like Sturgeon and some stubby snappers.

From El Mina we headed to a place called Green Turtle Beach resort, it was a dream, incredible meals, a staff that was courteous and ready to meet all of our

needs, but above all it had kilometers of beautiful white sandy beach that seem to have been completely undisturbed for all of time. There was hardly a shred of civilization anywhere around asides from the few huts that comprised the resort. We woke up in the mornings to the sound of waves crashing on the beach, spent our days playing football, eating coconut, swimming and lying around. Perhaps I only thought so highly of this place because the conditions prior to it were all so terrible, nevertheless, as corny as it sounds, from now on whenever I think of paradise, I will think of Green Turtle.

We stopped briefly in Accra before making our way east. Accra itself is a surprisingly modern city, at least by African standards, they have mostly paved roads, sprawling areas of multi story buildings, and a general semblance of order and efficiency in that things actually seem to be getting done and the people all seem to be working relatively hard. However, it's still Africa, it still has an open sewer system lining every street, animals still roam through places they (or perhaps we) shouldn't be, and the heat is still unbearable. We spent a night out on the town and during the ride home our cab popped a tire going over a pothole, so we pulled to the side of the road to replace it only to find ten or so other cars also pulled over, all of whom seemed to be changing tires or fixing displaced hub caps. As we stood there in the not well enough lit street watching tires pop and hubcaps go flying we were reminded once again that despite the fact that we were in a relatively advanced city, we were still in Africa. I bet that pothole is still there.

From Accra we headed over to Volta, a region on the east of the country that bordered Togo. The three days we spent here may have been my favorite of the entire trip. Most of the region is covered in rainforests and mountains, and offers several amazing

hikes and beautiful views. The first day there we spent climbing Mt. Afadjato, which apparently is the biggest in West Africa, but again that's one of those facts that you come to question in Africa, particularly when you're standing on the top and can clearly see mountains with higher peaks. Nevertheless, it offered an incredible view of the entire tropical Volta region including lake Volta, the largest man made lake in the world and home to the dam that powers all of Ghana. We hiked back down and then decided to go on another hike through the forest where we saw a wide array of birds, insects and wildlife, and ate from the mango and cocoa trees we came across before stumbling upon a waterfall that contained a relatively deep basin for us to swim in, despite the fear of leeches, with sweat pouring we all immediately jumped in. In the afternoon we watched the locals making palm wine and palm spirit out of palm trees, a pretty intricate, time consuming process that they have mastered.

We woke up early the next morning to the sounds of machetes at work and as we looked outside we saw thirty to forty school children hacking away at the grass, yet another example of the painstaking labor that Africans endure on a daily basis. Soon afterwards we hiked over the mountains and across the Ghana-Togo border to spend the rest of the morning in a little village where we could practice our French and get a taste of West African diversity. Our lunch that day was oversized rat, dubbed grass-cutter, which was actually pretty tender if you managed to ignore the head, claws and hair that were all still there. In the afternoon we walked back over the border, drove/hiked to the Vly waterfalls, apparently the highest in West Africa. The sun was just breaking through the clouds and had cast a rainbow over the giant waterfall. Directly above the basin were thousands of bats flying about. We stayed a couple hours before heading over to a monkey sanctuary

where you could hold up bananas and the monkeys would come and try and rip the banana out of your hands, if your grip was tight enough the monkey would be forced to peel it out of your hand to get the banana inside.

The next day me and three friends went to Lake Volta, hassled some locals into taking us onto their boat and got a tour of the lake. We stopped at one island where we came across a family of fishermen that looked like they had never seen a white person in their life, let alone four of them. I'm pretty sure that the lives of this family hadn't changed for nearly five hundred years. One of the kids looked like he had some sort of water-born flesh eating virus as his black skin was littered with pink blotches, again such is Africa.

We spent my last two days in Ghana at some crappy beach resort in Accra that had us leaving Africa with a bad taste in our mouths. We couldn't swim because the beach was filthy, littered with garbage, rocks, and actual human feces. There was also a group of Rastafarians that lived on the beach who hassled us almost every hour that we were there and I'm sure were responsible for the beach being in such bad shape. Yet I hope to always remember my trip to Africa, certain things can only be experienced there.

Lasting Impressions

I don't think I've devoted enough time in this space to writing about tro-tro's, so here we go. They are the lifeblood of Ghana, and from what I hear a similar version of them can be found all over Africa. Twenty people, packed into a van not big enough to properly fit them all, no safety features of any kind, with daring drivers driving on roads not properly suited for such clunky vehicles. They break down often and never fail to

make you queasy, but they are as much a part of my trip as anything. On one of the tro-tro's I was on the roof was not properly in place, which turned out to be particularly inconvenient as we ended up passing through some heavy rain. Everyone on board began yelling and screaming at the driver to do something but he just calmly kept on driving like nothing at all was happening, meanwhile every passenger on board, along with all of our luggage, was getting soaked. On another trip, I watched in awe as a woman forced her child to pee into a small bag and then just threw it out the window. I spent countless hours on these things as they got me from point A to point B time and time again, often you have to take three or four different ones just to arrive at your destination, thankfully whenever one breaks down or something else goes wrong, there is always another one coming up behind it.

Despite all of the memories that I have been able to recall, there are still tons of little intricacies involved in traveling through Ghana that make the place memorable. Everywhere you go people will be staring at you or offering you something, most of them are just curious, over time you begin to see how easy it might have been to take advantage of their generosity. But there is also a litany of customs that leave lasting impressions; like the way everyone hisses at each other to get attention, the constant calls of obruni(literally meaning foreigner), the intricate handshakes used at every greeting, the fearlessness of children who without hesitation will hold your hand and follow you around wherever you go.

What I hope to remember most is how open and trusting the society was, it's probably just one outsider's perspective but it seems like crime doesn't exist as everywhere you look people are leaving personal possessions just lying around without the notion even coming

into their head that someone might take it. I felt entirely secure walking around on my own in Ghana, even if there did happen to be one bad seed I sincerely felt as though the rest of the people around me would be willing to help me out and make sure I was properly taken care of. It's that level of trust that people in Ghana(which I imagine can be found in several other parts of Africa) have for each other that makes it stand out from any place I have been. Yes, they don't have some of the commodities that we have or a comparable level of education, but they have something else that we will never possess. I think I can best exemplify what I'm talking about by rehashing one more story from my trip, it took place on a tro-tro going from Volta to Accra. A man had just got on board and was carrying his infant son with him. Soon afterwards it became obvious that the baby was growing uncomfortable and that he needed something. A woman from the backseat stretched her arms forward to take the baby, the man then agreed to give his son to a complete stranger, who breast fed the kid and held him for the rest of the two hour journey. I can't imagine that there are too many other places in the world where I would see something like that.

Joseph, closed the book gently, and put it back in its proper place. He checked out a book about the Thirty Years war and some obscure Irish poetry and went back home where just before falling asleep he read out loud from McClarney's book of songs…..

A drunks love song

So boldly ye go thy long adrifter

To me my swell and blow the fister

I'll fare thee marrow and fight the kister

If only ye would don my sister

For once there was a great big pie

It twined and splundered upon the sky

So boldly ye go and break my soul

I have no more a bounty's tole

I break and swallow and bite the night

Till the breath in the marrow shits maggot delight

I'll kill the sinners and feed my blitzen

For the gantly heroi is only me

To the forest! To the forest!

The men did march

And hacked there way

To mars field marsh

And there ill kill you Claudians

You Irenes and Edwards

To make way for my Neros

My Ivans and Urbans

God I loved her

None else would do

Why the hair

Was donned so blue

The sea and leaves

They knew the truth

No man could tell

The boldly spoof

I'll love her forever

She'll never see

The tears I weep

When its only me

As drunk as drunk could be

Chapter 2

The Josephus Problem.

40 men in a circle decide that the only honorable thing left for them to do is end their lives and decide it best that every third person should kill the person to their right, leaving only one behind.

The guilty mathematician.

Josephus.

Joseph awoke the morning after his trip to the library feeling invigorated and thought about how he could proceed with his day. He was determined not to spend the morning as he usually did, eating a big breakfast, catching up on news and then engaging himself in a litany of other such trivial pursuits. He sat upright on his sofa, thinking, all the while the solution to his rumblings hung but was never picked, choosing instead to

exhaust all other options before bringing to light the answer that now seemed so obvious. And so he danced around with ideas of school, finding new work, and all other things practical before residing on the option he always knew he would choose. Travel.

It was an urge to travel, nothing more; but it presented itself in the form of a real seizure, intensified to the point of passionateness; in fact, it was like a delusion of the senses. His desire was clairvoyant; his imagination, which had not yet come to rest since his hours of work, summoned up a representative sampling of all the wonders and terrors of the variegated earth, all of which it attempted to visualize at one and the same time; he saw, saw a landscape, a tropical swampy region under a vapor-laden sky, damp luxuriant and uncanny; it was like the portrait of a primitive world of islands, morasses and silt-laden rivers. From lusty fern clusters, from bottoms in which grew thick, waterlogged plants with outlandish blossoms, he saw hairy palm trunks rising near and far; he saw strangely misshapen trees sinking their roots through the air into the soil, into stagnant waters that reflected the green shade, where amid floating flowers as white as milky and as large as platters, birds of an exotic species, with hunched shoulders, with monstrous beaks, stood in the shallows and gazed off to the side, motionless; between the knotty, tubular stalks of the bamboo thicket he was the eyes of a crouching tiger sparkly – and he felt his heart pounding with fright and puzzling desire….[1]

Upon discovering within himself such an avid realization, he began comprehending all of the troubles that bore with it and that may prevent him from ever embarking on any journey he may decide to take. His parents, his friends and his job all

[1] Thomas Mann. Death in Venice. Dover Publications, 1995, pg. 4

became insurmountable obstacles to his heart's desire. Yet, despite the tangible problems that were mounting in his head, his consciousness pivoted to other things.

There grew, or had grown, to be a woman in Joseph's life. She was a religious girl, a follower of the book. They had met one day on a crowded street. She wore a tight yellow shirt, had softly tanned skin, and curious eyes. She stopped Joseph as they crossed paths and asked him if he would be willing to meet with her and discuss Jehovah, Joseph agreed, he loved being converted, though he would have said yes to anything she had asked.

Weeks had gone by and Joseph found each meeting with the beautiful young girl all the more pleasant. Her figure encapsulated his dreams and he thought romantically of no other woman but her.

Alas she became the cause of much of his frustration as he began to realize that she would never think of him in that way. Villainous thoughts would creep into his mind, "I'll rip you from your life, take you to be my wife on a farm in the country, raise good children, and fuck all day."

As thoughts of her again gushed forth he had, for a short amount of time, forgotten what it was that he had become so worked up about. Yet these fantasies too fell victim to the devil of time and in the end only served to compound his desire to leave the world he knew behind.

Then there was that other thing, that sad but pressing thing. It was something he never spoke of, dreaded being confronted with, but thought of often. What a weight would be lifted if he didn't have his filial duties to attend to. To keepsake his parent's traditions and the burden that their love for him imposed had hindered many of his days

and made thoughts of the future unpleasant. Without it he could be free. True, boiling, unadulterated freedom, that's all he ever wanted.

Chapter 3

"Gracious Bacchus! Accept this empty jar! You will know best,
what in pious worship of thee became of all the first" – Eratosthenes

It is not through our senses by which we are to make sense of life
but what we have left when our senses have left us.

It took the rest of the day, the night, a brooding morning, and another big breakfast before Joseph realized that he had wasted another day in idle thought. When the realization came to mind he put on some proper clothes and went off to see an old friend, John Oldcastle.

The burdening big city awaited him as Joseph scrubbed himself clean, prepared a few of the things he would need and boarded the bus in an effort to avoid both the

maddening traffic of the car and the swarms of people in the city's decrepit subway system. Much to his dismay when he got on board he saw that there were no empty seats left, so Joseph gripped the rail, planted his feet and set himself up for another roller coaster ride on the rickety plank through the city. Something smelled, of what he could not tell but it lingered, a blue sky entrapment could be seen through the window of smog and rut. The people around him were old and wrinkled, looking more like statues of themselves than the reality that tried to bleed through. There were no traces of inspiration or enlightenment to be had on this bus so he stared out the window and thought of man's accomplishments, of the order that he hath bestowed upon himself with his German streets, English transportation, Italian carved cityscapes and French curbs, but those images, and any appealing traits they carried, were being pushed to the background, what lay in the fore was the jump from the farm where humanity stopped their scavenger ways and rooted themselves in the earth. In G-d's earth. The earth of the Jews. The Wasteland.

A knock, knock, knock on the big oak door were heard and attended to by Mr. Oldcastle, as most people now called him, but it was those who still called him Johnnie whose company he enjoyed. He too had once had a rather frivolous youth, an idealist who had sought to bring about as much happiness as he could ascertain to those around him until one day he came to the realization, with the help of Joseph, that affluent altruism could never satiate him. To those who knew him little he was brilliant yet ostentatious, lavish and crude, impetuous though not crass, cunning however wholesome enough on face-value that Ms. Betherby had still allowed him to be seen by her daughter. Joseph and him were friends, a friendship borne out of the salt of the earth, sewed together by seeds immemorial.

Joseph had always believed Johnnie to be too self indulging to have such praise hurled on him by those that surrounded him, even if he did a good job of keeping those passions for himself hidden. He was thought by many that had only brief meetings with the man as an intellectual god, known to talk for hours on end about any number of subjects in an immaculately articulate form. As a result a throng of sycophants had sprouted up all around him, from his publishers to his students to even his hairdressers.

But through all of his knowledge, through all of his good looks and charm, through all of the stories, there was always that flaw in his eyes, not nearly substantial enough to be endowed with the title of a tragic flaw, yet there it was, that obscene hubris that lurked beneath. Joseph, on his more antagonistic days, would attempt to reveal to Mr. Oldcastle how petty all those hangers-on were, though on most days he did not meddle in the public affairs of his friend. To Johnnie's credit, he never let the adoration of the crowds affect him thoroughly as he kept it deep within him, and it was there where he had managed to subdue and tame it. Nonetheless, a bull once shackled always longs to be free of its master, in Johnnie's case that bull usually found its spur in diaphanous elixir.

He was not a light drinker by any means as it would take quite a few drinks for that little light to come on inside. But when it did, another person came through, one no longer refined and magnanimous, but abrasive and flamboyant. Tilting his head up he would strut around lambasting everyone and everything for their insignificance in life. For the superfluous things that they held dear, for the beliefs that they shared, for the organizations that they had set up, for the politics that they believed, for the philosophers that they quoted, for the company that they kept, for the style they maintained, for the very shit that they spewed. Yet only Joseph seemed aware of the fact that these moments

of fury, when the drink had completely consumed him, when his walk had gone a kilter, when his breath had gone sour, when his words mumbled, that they were finally witnessing the real Mr. Oldcastle, that this was who he was behind the mask of intelligence and fame, reputation and position, a drunk who wanted nothing but to dispose of all those around him and indulge himself in nothing but his own company. Yet Johnnie's mornings always shone brightly and he was quick to make amends for any obscenities he may have flung forth the night before.

Now here the man stood, brown penny lacers, stilted pants and a button down white dress shirt with a little fleur de lis sown on the lapel, all of which covering up broad shoulders, and a long lengthy torso set above a powerful set of legs. His face shone forth with his large protruding adam's apple, masculine jaw, full Danish lips, long wavy hair, and hazel eyes with full eyelashes and thickset eyebrows. If not for his slightly crooked nose and silly ears he'd be among the most handsome of them all. In an instant the memories of the nights spent stumbling between bars yelling at one another, berating others and hitting on any woman unlucky enough to pass by flashed before both men's eyes, they smiled and embraced before Mr. Oldcastle guided his friend into his home.

Johnnies' young buxom wife came bouncing down the long stairwell with nothing on but a big blue housecoat, her large breasts doing whirlwinds underneath. She was dark in complexion, with a big face, wide eyes, and a short, stubby physique. The couple were a stark contrast of one another as she was quite average by all appearances, but Joseph never thought ill of his friend for having chosen the young egrake as his wife.

"Hello Joseph, it certainly has been too long since we have seen you around here, why has that been?"

Before Joseph could respond in a timely manner she burst forth once again with “oh nevermind, I’m just happy to see you, let me take your coat”.

“Well certainly no one wants to dwell too long on things of the past,” remarked Mr. Oldcastle, “let's go to the living room, how about some chess, or have you not recovered yet from the last beating you took at my hands?” Joseph agreed while Mrs. Oldcastle ran off to the kitchen to get the two men some drinks and to begin preparing a hearty lunch.

“Your move Joseph”. The pieces were all set and ready to begin their intricate set of moves once again. Joseph was relatively quick to act, moving the king's pawn two spaces forward to the middle of the board. Mr. Oldcastle on the other hand never took the game so quickly, he studied the pieces meticulously. His years of experience with the game had turned him into a shrill and codified chess player, he prided himself in the game and believed he could make a fair match to any and all chess players. Furthermore, although Johnnie felt sincerely that Joseph was a friend of his, he still felt the need to prove himself as the superior player. It had made Mr. Oldcastle blind to his defeats as he replaced them all with magnanimous victories.

Pawn to C4

Joseph knew this of his friend and understood it better than even Mrs. Oldcastle herself. It would irritate him at times, but he never made a fuss about it.

Knight to E3

And so the game continued, Mr. Oldcastle calculating every step while Joseph just let his whits guide him. Nevertheless, the game had been relatively evenly played until

Mrs. Oldcastle came bouncing back, filled with excitement and ready to tell them the glorious news she had just uncovered.

"The lemonade's been squeezed, please take a break from what must be boring the both of you and have some."

"Please we don't need to go TO the lemonade right now do we?" Johnnie was quick to bark back.

"Well what makes you think its going to come so easily to you?"

Mr. Oldcastle quickly became frustrated by the thought of having to remove his mind from the game and deal with his wife, but caught himself long before any kind of eruption could boil to the surface. He turned around and stared longingly at the little woman and said, "Pwwease can you bwing us some wemonade?"

They met eyes, she waited a few moments, let out a loving sigh, turned and frolicked away in pursuit of the lemonade, herself forgetting the other news she had intended on delivering.

The game went on, Joseph won the first, was persuaded into a second, and threw the third so they could move on to something else.

They talked for a short time of movies but found their conversation stymied by a rant of Mr. Oldcastle's that concluded with the following quote.

"To be truly original has become an impossible endeavor. Too many strains of every transmutation exist. The only hope an artist now has it to grab hold of one such strain and hold it true as best he sees fit."

The quote engendered a series of tests between the two combatants. Joseph loved learning from Johnnie and would question him about any and all things at every

opportunity just to dig out a little more knowledge from that exquisite mind of his. They soon found themselves discussing the literary conquests they had recently made. Joseph knew that any such discussion with Mr. Oldcastle would inevitably lead to him going through his library of self written diaries and journals and quoting one or more of his own passages. The only change this time was that the words that he had written down were not his own for on this occasion Johnnie picked out something from Dostoevsky which Joseph had remembered him quoting at least one other time before.

"The very reason why we sometimes desire sheer nonsense is that, in our stupidity, we see in this nonsense the simplest method of achieving some sort of presupposed advantage. And when all this is explained and calculated on paper (which is very probably because it is vile and senseless to believe beforehand that there are various laws of nature that man will never discover) then we can suppose, there will not be any of these so-called desires. If desire should at some time completely coincide with reason, we would reason and not desire precisely because it is impossible, for example, whilst safeguarding reason to desire nonsense and thus act knowingly against reason and wish to harm oneself."[2]

Joseph found himself at an opportunistic moment as he had once been quite fond of that particular book and felt up to challenging what he had just heard by pointing out to his friend that more of the passage must be read to grasp its context. Joseph began to scour through Mr. Oldcastle's library, knowing full well that he would have a copy of the

[2] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. Notes From the Underground. Oxford University Press. 1991, pg. 28

book in question somewhere within it. Within seconds he ripped it from the shelf, tore through the pages and found the quote he was looking for.

"Yes, sir, but that's just where I see the snag. Gentlemen, forgive me for philosophizing so; that's what forty years in the underground does! Allow me to fantasize a bit. Don't you see, gentlemen? Reason is a fine thing, there's no question about it, but reason is only reason and only satisfies man's rational faculties, whereas desire is a manifestation of the whole of life, that is the whole of human life, along with reason and all our head-scratching. And even if in this manifestation our life frequently turns out to be rubbishy, it's nevertheless life and not just the extraction of a square root. I, for instance, quite naturally want to live in order to satisfy my rational capacity, which is about one-twentieth of my capacity for living. What does reason know? Reason knows only what it has managed to find out (the rest, perhaps, it will never discover; that's no comfort, but why not say it?), whereas human nature acts as a whole, by everything that is in it, consciously and unconsciously; and even if it lies, it still lives."[3]

Johnnie retorted by quoting the end of the very same chapter where the rest of the speech came.

"Eh gentlemen, what will have become of your will when the whole thing had ended up with tables and arithmetic, when there is only twice two is four in demand? Twice two will be four without my will. That's what will become of your will."[4]

[3] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. Notes From the Underground. Oxford University Press. 1991, pg. 28
[4] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. Notes From the Underground. Oxford University Press. 1991, pg. 29

With that the conversation ended.

The day began a new after dinner with the remuneration of a rather heated exchange in which the two participants launched themselves into a series of diatribes lasting well into the midday sun. Much too both men's surprise they found themselves reaching a consensus in opinion. One that caused much elation in them and which can be surmised by the following…..

'This distinction between what is natural and what is not is hyperbolic at best. Where does one draw the line? There are those that say that we are intervening in nature by humanizes various activities; building ourselves roads and bridges, factories and sewage plants, greenhouse gardens and centers for science. However, our constructing a road, dam or skyscraper is as natural an application of our attributes as a bird building herself a nest. Is that not natural? If the answer is no then we can proceed to the example of plants, when they decay or produce offspring are they not modeling their own type of construction? Is the distinction between that which is natural and that which is not simply the application of higher cognitive ability? Would not the act of thinking then have to be unnatural? Would humanities existence, and by extension all creatures with any semblance of brain function be a paradox? While some say might makes right, these others suppose what is right to simply be what is natural, an unbalance, hypocrisy or something of the sort is inherent in nature's design of thinking beings.'

Johnnie broached the next subjection with as much subtlety as a bear trying to step lightly over bubble wrap. It was a conversation they had shared many times before

but whose subject always intrigued them, especially when a significant amount of time had passed between new revelations about one another. Again, the two men had drawn swords and made their assertions, espousing many differences, Joseph found himself violently withdrawn from the conversation at a most didactic point but allowed himself to come to the following conclusions based on the ideas that had been passed between the two men.

'Aquinas stipulates that God cannot make a contradiction true, much like Einstein did when he said something akin to 'not even god has the power to make four a prime number'. However, while Einstein understood that this implies a limit to god's power, Aquinas - who was chosen because he represents the widest spectrum of the philosophical theologians - does not, nor do others of his ilk. Why is it that they manage to reconcile the fact that even God has a limit to what is possible, yet they continue to espouse his absolute divinity? Anything with a limit exists within a system, a simple statement ascertained by the very definition of the word. It would then be obvious to state that if God were to exist, and if his limits were true, then there would be something….though not necessarily some being….that God exists within. Making that other the creator.

This and the case of the first cause vs. the infinite - either something began the world or the realm of causation stretches into infinity - are the only pieces of theology worth having.'

Following the last bit of ostentatious behavior Johnnie and Joseph decided that they had enough of each others company for the time being and decided to get an early

night's sleep so as to wake up early in the morning and hike the red river cliffs just behind Johnnie's house. It was at that point that Mrs. Oldcastle appeared to guide Joseph to the guest room and assure that he had all of the provisions that he would need for the night. Johnnie strolled back into his library of his residence, opened up one of his manuscripts and began reading a poem of his own making.

Love as an endless polemic is never sincere.
Thus spoke the old immortal Antitheses, the only words he ever spoke.
His life was lived without the need to communicate.
Yet this one simple statement shows the depth of his understanding
one that is deeper then most embody.
His life was lived between the rags,
in inhospitable environments did he thrive.
Shameful that his mind is forever closed to us
Did he dream like Descartes?
Believe like Marx?
Aspire like Barborossa?
Inspire like Calvin?
Will like Schopenhauer?
None will ever know
Yet his legend persists.
Undaunted.

Chapter 4

"There is nothing in the world more difficult than plain speaking, and nothing easier than flattery."[5] *– Dostoevsky*

The two men awoke the next morning determined to make pass the mission they had described to each other the night before. They gathered their gear and made out for the same trail they first embarked upon nine years ago, since then they have attempted it six times, yet never able to make it in time for the sunrise. They had assured each other that this time would be different as they already woken up at two and believed themselves capable of beginning their climb by three giving them all the time they would need to make it to the summit by five.

[5] Dostoevsky, Fyodor, Crime and Punishment. Penguin Group. 1991, pg. 568

All things were going to plan, by 3:05 they had reached the head of the trail. Bounding up rocks, over roots and through shrubbery they found themselves to be full of youthful vigor and exuberance. All the while they said very little to one another, simply keeping their heads down and forging along in the dark. Joseph's pace was slightly faster than that of Johnnie's and he soon pulled away.

An hour or so into the climb Joseph paused to allow his aching legs a break, his breath had shortened as his body was reminding him that it had been a long time since he had done anything active. He bent over and clutched his knees to give his soles a moments rest, doing so he caught site of a big, flat rock and jostled over to have a good sit. Breathing in his surroundings he let his ears run free through the rustles of the early morning leaves. He figured they had a little over an hours worth of hiking left, ample time to reach the peak.

While he sat his mind wandered again towards what he should be doing with his life. Working, earning a living, settling down, creating, building a foundation, all appeared to be the rational choice, the smart choice. It would not be long before he turned thirty and still he had not developed any sort of living which he could build off. Should life not be a progression? A gradual ascension? A series of toils that build towards a stable and meaningful end? For too long he had been stopping and starting, filling his life with abrupt deviations that were nothing but ends in it of themselves.

The allure of travel, which had always been lurking, again filled his thoughts. Never letting itself die it would constantly reinvent itself in new places, new mysteries, new wondrous dream worlds filled with rich, lavish jungles, never-ending blue seas and evanescent mountain peaks. The immediate surroundings are never enough, the world is

too large, too grand not to be seen, even if one spent a lifetime traveling and still seeing only a fraction of its bliss it would be worth it. No spot on earth is identical to any other, the variations of the snowflake love to taunt and tease, knowing that it will never be known in its entirety by any one man.

And so the debate raged, neither side of his conscience giving much ground till Johnnie appeared down the trail and the debate within him dissipated down a line of neurons tucking itself away.

Joseph picked himself up off his stool to greet his friend and continue his climb. They ascended together and kept a steady pace, Joseph now letting his friend set the tone for both of them.

Along the way, Joseph was able to convey to Johnnie the boredom that he had been experiencing for too long now. A feeling of comfort emanated through Joseph as he purged the words from his lips. However Mr. Oldcastle turned out to be of little help in the matter and ended up giving him the only advice that he himself could imagine doing had he been in Joseph's place, to travel. An ironic smirk passed across Joseph's mouth when he heard these words. Joseph inquired to his friends as to where in the world he suggest to go.

"There're always the depths of Europe."

Joseph nodded in quiet agreement, knowing full well its history and what experiences awaited any traveler to Europe. Joseph conveyed to his friend that while Europe, in all its splendor, was a place he still had much traveling to do in, he was in search of an experience more detached from the ones he had known, more remote from the life he had become accustomed to living.

The two men found themselves engrossed in ideas of travel and delight, regaling themselves with times had in far flung parts of the world. As the discussion continued to unfold Mr. Oldcastle soon began to recount his tale of his time spent in Scandinavia, a place where Joseph had never been but had always wanted to go. He loved listening to other people's tales of travel as his own such adventures would spring forth within them.

"It began in Stockholm. When I arrived on a red eye flight and immediately checked into my hotel, had myself a stiff drink and went to bed. Oh before I continue, there was a poem in my mind that drove me as I moved forward, one of the most simple, yet moving stories I have ever heard of St. Augustine as a boy who took a spoon to the beach and tried to shovel out all of the water in the ocean."

As was his nature, quotes of the sort and aphorisms of his own making continued to be interjected into his narrative. Joseph for his part was content to follow in silence and let his friend talk unabated.

"Anyways, Stockholm, it was a nice city, but only nice. The shopping districts are marvelous places of cobblestone streets and the stores all have giant slabs of marble that seem held in place by the frigid air alone. The palaces and relics of lore too are marvelous, lets see, what else, ahhh, there is the former home of Gustavus Adolphus which must merit consideration among the finest homes anyone has ever built for himself. Give me Swedish palace over one of these gaudy modern mansions any day, maybe one day. Though I gotta say I was a little disappointed, oddly enough, by the women, mind you they were beautiful, but fateful images of Swedish bikini teams they were not. Maybe its just the cold forcing them to cover up, nevertheless I found them far more modest, conservative and gentile in appearance then I had envisioned"

He paused and stopped walking to sip from his canister some fragrant Tea from the Himalayan waterways of Yunnan. “You know something Joseph, I’ve always enjoyed mornings best, with every passing second the day grows more and more wearisome!”

“Along the way I met a writer, a marvelous man struggling against the better forces of nature who, while we were engaged in discussion, told me something that stuck with me for some time, ‘everyone gets a good review, two if they're lucky, three if they’re skilled and four if they’re an artist. I’m still waiting for that third.”

Joseph soon drew the ire of the narrator by showing his disdain for these ever increasing interjections.

“Alright, alright, I’ll continue before engendering any more anger in your precious volition.”

The two men had reached a rickety wooden staircase that required two hands and sure footing to pass safely. Yet still Johnnie kept on talking.

“It was when I went north, across the border and into Norway that I was able to grasp the wonder of Northern Europe. I ventured into a small town called Yerelmic, but whose pronunciation I must be butchering. There I found myself in a little inn by a frozen stream. I think I spent a month there, every day going across the seemingly perpetually frozen river to a coffee shop for breakfast and morning company. My first acquaintance was the young waitress who served me there everyday. Gaila was her name.” as a smile of content that Joseph knew all too well broadened across his companions face.

“At night she would escort me to pubs where boisterous men would gather. Eager to engage travelers they regaled me with great tales of Nordic lore. The best, of those I can remember at least, was one about a man that lived many years ago in that part of the

world named Brachus the Guardsman. Brachus lived a hard life, having spent most of his years on patrol in the Northern provinces where the climate had worked to mold him into the very picture of the chiseled Nordic explorer with arms like a bull and a beard that nearly reached his belly button. He had decided one day that he had had enough of life spent serving his country so he went instead to serve his fellow man by coming back to the town he grew up in to be its guardsman, the very town where I was staying. In those days men like him were needed to fend off roaming pirates and scoundrels of all sorts. He hired no men, only trained a pack of wolves to stand guard by the gates of the town every day and frighten off unruly visitors. No noblemen, prince, or even king ever dared to cross paths with the man who also became known as the wolf lord and under whose watchful eyes the town prospered as it engaged in favorable trade with the other towns and villas of the province."

"You still listening back there" Johnnie said as he reared himself around to look into Joseph's eyes. With a decisive nod of his head and an 'uh huh' he reassured his friend that he was still engaged in the story and that he would like him to continue.

"One day a young daring thief found a way to breach the town walls undetected and descend upon the population. Night after night he would come, take what he fancied and leave before Brachus could get to him. After a week of nights spent in torment the villagers approached the home of great Brachus on the outskirts of town to assure themselves that he was hard at work catching the thief. When the bravest of the villagers summoned up his courage and opened the front door the town as a whole let out a gasp. A pervasive stench of excrement and disease blew through the doorway as they saw, no more than a few meters from the door that now stood wide open, a ravaged body lying

facedown on the barren floor. Large chunks of flesh had been ripped away, from the thighs, from the small of his back, and from the neck, exposing all manner of guts and bone. Even his beard and the great chin it grew from had been ripped away and now lay in a bloody entanglement beside him on the wooden floor."

Despite the fact that the climb had become a little steeper and that Johnnie's breath was beginning to shorten he continued telling the tale.

"The villagers fell into a deep panic and each fled into the woods taking all they cherished with them only to find that no other town would take them. Begrudgingly they came back to the same village, and started life once again with the tale of Brachus haunting them up to the present day. As for the robber, he, free to plunder, stripped the inhabitants of all they cherished and once he had his fill moved on to the next town."

"So many stories told. Oh what joy! Some just as queer as the one of Brachus, though engaging through and through. Lying in bed at night Gaila would fill in any blanks I had in the stories. I learned of Vikings, of Eric the Red, of Barasmus, of the Grey Forest, of Leap the Elk and Little Peter Pastureman. Oh, I love them all and will jot down all I remember soon enough. I wont spoil the place anymore with mere words, but truly a wonderland it was. For Gaila alone I almost stayed. uchhhh. Alas I could not. Anyway, enough stories, let's make haste, for as they say the hands of time have a habit of drawing nearer the faster we move"

With that adage in mind, the two men suspended all speech and took to the mountain with fervor. Soon enough they reached the summit, though they were late again for they missed the first rays of the sun by only a few moments. With sardonic smiles they looked at each other, knowing that they would have to do it again some day.

Exhausted they sat down and peered out into the horizon as the sun perked itself on the ledge of the world and arrested all in glowing embrace.

"And just as he who, with exhausted breath,
having escaped from sea to shore, turns back
to watch the dangerous waters he has quit,
So did my spirit, still a fugitive,
Turn back to look intently at the pass"[6]

With each millimeter of ascent thereafter Joseph's confidence in his decision to travel grew. By the time the sun had begun to be oppressive Joseph knew what he was going to do.

[6] Dante Alighieri, Inferno, Allen Mandelbaum. Bantam Books, 1980, pg. 59

Chapter 5

Conscious does make cowards of us all

– Hamlet

Morning came and Joseph prepared himself to part ways with his friend. He was never good at saying goodbye and even though he always meticulously worked out the details of what might happen and what he would say, his plans never seemed to flower the way he envisioned. Nonetheless he did the only thing he could, picked himself up, strolled downstairs, ate quickly and said goodbye, first to the little wife with as much pleasantness as he could muster and then to his old friend.

Mr. Oldcastle. quipped “History's great lessons. Tolerance Unites! Tolerance in the hands of time divides.”

A firm handshake and out the door.

The bus ride home was long and arduous, but Joseph found his mind wandering in and out of aphoristic notation as he sat staring out the bus window. The choices he had to make were bouncing ever more vigorously from ear to ear, yet he was still finding solace in his decision to go. What direction it would take was just beginning to excite him, and with his future looming over him like a raging storm the following came to mind.

"What if I should study past ages and time's veracity?
Ay, sure enough: that is the thing for me!
Legends I read e'en in childhood's days,
And since then I've kept up that branch of learning.
I will follow the path of the human race!
Like a feather I'll float on the stream of history,
Make it all live again, as in a dream.
See the heroes battling for truth and right,
As an onlooker only, in safety ensconced,
See thinker's perish and martyr's bleed,
See empires founded and vanish away,
See world-epochs grow from their trifling seeds;
In short, I will skim off the cream of history"[7]

The romantic that lived deep within him had him by the throat and drove him on, bold determination, raw and powerful. All of life's frivolous details were cast aside as he filled himself with intrepid desire and dreams of destinations far gone.

[7] Ibsen, Henrik. Peer Gynt, Pg. 86

A trip up the Mekong grasped at his soul, starting in Vietnam and snaking up through all of SouthEast Asia in a land the Khmer once called king, at long last reaching the steps of the Himalayas and making his way across to reach Everest itself and gaze for days at her peak and wonder at all of earth's creation.

Or perhaps get himself a sailboat, learn the craft, and launch himself from Brisbane covering the breadth of the South Pacific in the footsteps of Captain Cook, jumping between island hubs separated by days of nothing but dolphins and white clouds.

Hellenism, the Colossus of Rhodes and the Athens of Pericles next sprung forth, a blue blur of the Mediterranean and a splash of ivory and muscle fell into sight before the picture took focus and Zeus in all his thunder bolting glory came clear.

Or to follow the route of the great messengers and tradesmen, those of long ago that delivered whatever may be from the hearts of European civilization to the awe encompassing specter of Asia and land himself in the home of the Khan's.

Then there were the paths laid in the last of the unknown wildernesses, in the valleys of the Andes, whose tribes had long ago carved away at the rocky terrain, civilization at the end of the earth to sit and dream of their depths.

And then there was Africa, oh Africa. Lightness of breadth, darkness of heart, the root of it all, held in tact by the bumblings of men. Dreams live on the continent of the primordial, the savage, the tapestry of all things pure. Start in the north, Casablanca, Algiers or Alexandria and head all the way to Cape Town. The Horror!? Certainly not, the splendor, the allure, the mystery, the romance, all waiting to be had, Africa.

That's it, in that fleeting moment of revelation he was resolved. To Africa he must go. Suddenly the indecisive nature that had guided him all his life had been cast aside, he

had made a decision, rash and bold, and stuck with it. Where precisely to go was the next question that begged his attention as practical reasoning came over him and he focused, tracing out the details of the plan he was hatching.

To him, and the perfunctory amount of knowledge he carried with him, it seemed clear that Africa could be divided into three relatively distinct regions. Those nations north of or on the Sahara, the French speaking west, and the rest comprising an odd amalgamation of the southern and the eastern shores, how the separation of Africa into these three regions had been decided upon no one on that day could answer but Joseph. In the west he could practice his French, traverse the gold mines, trace the paths of the slaves before they had been slaves, and bask in the temperate glow of equatorial life. In the south or the east he could live the life of a roaming Germanic conquistador, bouncing from one dysfunctional colony to another while conjuring up dreams of King Leopold rampaging through the tribes of the great jungles. And then there was the north, slightly more prosperous, bound by the glow of the Mediterranean and the distressing depth of the Sahara, basked in European, Middle Eastern and Islamic histories. And just as strange as any of the decisions he made on this bus ride were, it was this last option that he eventually settled on. The next question that arose was which country to begin with. He thought first of starting with Morocco and drifting east till he reached the shores of Asia, yet he managed again to toss reason aside and settle on Algeria and the Mediterranean wonderland of Algiers.

After getting off the bus he took a detour from his walk home in an attempt to clear his mind and assure himself of the decision he had made. He heard the blares of the shops, watched the busy people noisily bustling about, felt the frigid air, looked about at

the cold lifeless concrete jungle that engulfed him, stopped, turned around and headed straight back to his apartment to dream of the day to come.

He'd record the events of the next day in a black leather bound notebook that he took with him….

Departure

I did not leave the world behind me because I was trying to escape something and I wished never to be like Dante who 'came to himself in a dark forest', I only believe that there is more awaiting me in some obscure corner of the world than there is in the life that I will be leaving behind.

My voyage I found to be stranger than fiction. It began with a taxi ride I took to the port. The driver, a borderline racist and Indian by birth, but raised by Tamals was taught many a language, claiming he could converse in Tamal, Malay, Chinese, English and Hindi. He also would boast himself the owner of every dialect the English language had to offer, British by upping his colloquialisms, Australian by dropping them, American by swearing, Chinglish by injecting 'mani mani', Japlish by ending all nouns with 'nae', and would joke that even the deaf could not stop him from conversing. I came to know all of this and more because the man didn't shut up, 45 minutes of the car ride took and not more than five seconds of silence passed the whole way. However this was not always a bad thing, although the pleasantries seemed to come in waves. The 'conversation', of which I was not much a part of, moved abruptly from women, to cars, to travel, to history and to culture.

At long last the ride came to an end and I obligingly took the man's business card, promised to use him if ever again in the area, tipped him well, and bade him farewell as I looked out into the butt of the ship that would take me across the ocean, THE MATTEO RICCI..

The next point of interest on my trip were the characters I found myself in the vicinity of on board the ship, the most notable of which were the two ogres sitting to my left on the benches when we first pulled away from shore. Where exactly they came from I could not tell, though it was clear that they belonged to some class of indo-Aryan descent. Two men of gluttonous proportions, big fat potbelly centered between a balding pulpous skull, shrivel and frail arms, and poorly proportioned legs. They both fell asleep snoring before we had pulled away from land with their mouths hung open and their chins folded several times over. When they awoke they immediately ordered food and spoke in a harsh and awful dialect of some hideous origin.

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Joseph stopped to reminisce about the work that he had done and caught himself before seasickness could take hold, yet despite his desire to see it end his pen could not be stopped till it eeked out a little more.

The beautiful amongst us know not
Yet, the wild winds blow over the quakes
And the sparrows crow a little more.
But in the paleness of posterity
the sleeping lore wakes.

Chapter 6

" Life rebels against all uniformity"[8]*- Vaclav Havel*

Joseph awoke in the waking moments of a dream. Confused at first he soon found himself able to put the pieces together and realize that he was on the ground, lying on red tainted soil in the middle of a very old and bustling market. Blankly staring into the distance he opened up his senses and suddenly became acutely aware of his surroundings. Just in front of him was a large crowd of people swaying in bewildered frenzy. He also became aware of the disturbing fact that he could not tear himself from the ground, transfixed with his side to the earth and his eyes at a ninety degree angle to all that was in front of him. For a few moments the experience lingered until suddenly and without

[8] Vaclav Havel. Dear Dr. Husak. 1975

warning the crowd split in two, revealing a man standing far into the distance on top of a hill with a great beard. He was shouting and screaming at all of them, what he was saying Joseph could not understand for although his words carried into his exposed ear they came in a language that Joseph knew nothing of. Yet the scene was not left unintelligible as it was with Joseph's other ear, the one planted firmly into the red earth with which Joseph could hear most. Every vibration of earth was being synthesized into a message that Joseph's brain could make sense of. From the chickens fighting in a nearby coup to a baby left crying on her mothers shoulders to the goats and camels wandering in hysteria to even the dust as it was being scattered about in all directions by the turbulent wind, all were tangentially sensible. Yet still holding sway over them all was the man on the hill. With his great gray beard and tattered robes he stood in a frame, above his head he held something which Joseph bleakley squinted at in an effort to see clearly, the wind was sweeping across his beard and carried it and his clothes around with such fancy that it anthropomorphically emboldened whatever rhetoric he was trying in vain to elucidate.

Finally a great thunderclap was heard and everything, from the people, to the animals, to the particles of sand stopped in their tracks. The only thing that continued to move was the beard and clothes of the man on the hill. His image now stood clear and Joseph was able to see that held above his head were two great tablets.

And just like that he woke to the gentle swaying of the entire room which caught him in confusion until he remembered himself to be on a boat bound for the North African shore. The images from his dreams could no longer push through for he was out on the sea and began to think of all the memories the image invokes. Odysseus in the

Aegean, La Araucana in the Atlantic, Magellan rounding the horn, Marlow trekking up river, Cook in the South Pacific, ancient mariners in the arctic, all the riches of the world coming with them.

Joseph cracked open the pages of the last book he had quickly crammed into his luggage before leaving his house and read out loud the first words that followed the bookmark.

As daunting as war and peace yet just as vital to have had. And if I want to play with my words, who are you to find fault Wittgenstein or Noam? We philisophs have always known the effect of our words, their ambiguities, the propensity for preposterousness, within them is the art formed, to make them rigid is to break them, to adhere to conformity is to silence them, to let them run wild is to free them, to free us. However we cannot repress the truth you hold, for though your actions were overly bombastic, your opponents in nature ran wild with frivolous dreams. Those existentialists, those perverts, with Heidegger and Sartre at the helm, stirring the world to words madness. To give meaning to something that is there, waiting in shadows for men to uncover it is art, is culture, is humanity. To give meaning to nothing is baseness.

When the paragraph had ended he stretched himself awake, scrubbed his face in the little bathroom and set off for the upper decks. The night before was the first he had spent on board *The Matteo Ricci*.

The vessel was a rickety ol beast, better suited for lugging cargo than humans, though I guess history hasn't always been so kind as to separate the two. Full of

pockmarks, misprints, shotty paint jobs, but secure nonetheless. The other ocean bound folk were walking about, Joseph found himself in no mood to engage any of them, choosing instead to pass his time in a corner reading another book he had with him, James Watson's Double Helix. He had always admired the life of the scientist, especially those deeply immersed in a given problem, always he had wanted to know what it would be like to be working on something so profoundly important that nothing else in life seemed to matter, not women, nor hygiene, when all social conventions become superfluous.

Lunch was being served and it was finally time to mingle. Joseph picked himself up, book in hand, and strode over to what constituted the dining room. The people seemed bound for Algiers for the rest of time. Most dressed in rags, some with children in hand, nearly all with a dark complexion. Joseph first surveyed the crowd for a solitary dame, but disappointingly saw none that fit his appetite. He sat himself down an earshot away from a family of three. Mid way through the child came over and managed to tug at Joseph's pant leg before his mother could come and sweep him away. It was the only interaction he had with anyone on board for the duration of the trip.

A few days passed, Joseph ate his meals in silence, arrested himself to seclusion the rest of the time reading away. Thinking became a worthy enough preoccupation that he found himself in no need of the company of others. He had a lot to think about, what he was doing on this boat, what he would do when he arrived at port and where his next destination would be. With these questions swirling he went above deck with a pen and his trusty notebook.

I stared out over the sea and thought, for the first time in a while, about the G-d who used to consume me. In my younger days his were the only questions worth asking. After all, if he did exist, then the only noble life that could ever be lived would be one in pursuit of an understanding of him, if the answer proved to be false, then all those other aspects of reality that once seemed trivial could finally be delved into. After all, those other questions, whether they pertain to math, science, history, or anything else in the human realm, all had answers with my grasp. The opposite conclusion was where the real difficulties of life lie, as one must eventually strike a balance between the pursuit of perfection and all else which is required to live in this reality laid out before us.

Brutus began to think long and hard about the reasons why he eventually abandoned his quest to pursue the answer. All of the reasons that he ascertained never satiated him and he came to the conclusion that exhaustion had set in, or, even though he wasn't quick to admit it, laziness. After all, no man has ever come to a true answer as to what is God's plan or purpose or essence, why would HE ever attain such things. Even the most religious among us in the world are only truly religious because they have fully succumbed to the reality that the answer is not for us to know. Belief is submission to higher workings, one unfathomable and unattainable for mortal beings.

He also began to recall another realization he once had about the pursuit of scientific answers and how it eventually led to a submission of a different sort. Even if, by some remarkable feats of humanity, we were able to come up with all of the answers that math and physics and the natural world have in store for us, we would still never really know how this system came to be. The limitations of reason, which only finite beings possess, leave no other conclusion than this.

But, and now Brutus was really thinking, if the alignment of the sciences that allowed us to come into being are a result of sheer coincidence, that our being is purely the result of all of the biological and physical factors coming into place in perfect harmony, then haven't we reached an answer as definitive as would come from knowing whether or not God really does exist?

Brutus sat and thought, his mind was no longer working itself around the questions he had just come up with, it simply wondered and produced within him a blank stare. A void within himself had been created, one that he could not account for. Science is as far away from having an answer to all of nature's questions as religion and philosophy is to the true nature of god. Which again led him back to the previous conclusion, the equality of submission that both are doomed to. The only difference is that the religious among us know of their submission, while the majority of those who claim to study science are as aloof as the camel.

The straits of Gibraltar must have passed Joseph in his scribblings for when he looked up and peered out over the railing into the sea a great land mass had risen before him. At first it appeared as a cloud of mist on the horizon but soon the listless clouds took shape and sprouted mountains, rocky enclaves, long stretches of beach and then, the city of Algiers herself. The port was busy that day, or so it seemed to Joseph who lacked the knowledge of how restless this port had always kept itself, through history, now and forever it resided in that elite pantheon of places that have helped mold humanities path, where civilizations met, traded goods and ideas, and built palaces. To give any one of these points on the map distinction over any of the others seems futile at best, nonetheless

Joseph set out in his mind comparing this place with the other great port cities known to him around the world; Malacca where the Dutch first brought white men in droves to barter with the Asians; Hong Kong, Macau and Qingdao where the English, Portuguese, and Germans brought their wives and fed their ambitions to the Chinese; Jamestown where England brought civilization to the America's; the gold coast where humanities harshest lessons had been learned; Tierra Del Fuego; the Cape of Good Hope; Accra; Alexandria; Mumbai; Tokyo; Port Moresby; New Amsterdam; San Juan….

As mountains gave way to the shore the city appeared and with it came the harbor whose scores of ships were queuing en masse. The first to pass had a black hull, black sails and a black crew who watched with eager anticipation as the great steam liner that had just traversed the breadth of the Atlantic bullied its way through the water to stake its claim among the company of ships in front of it. Fishing boats and oil tankers, cargo vessels and passenger ships, dinghies and buoys, ocean liners and carriers, all passed before *The Matteo Ricci* as it docked. As soon as it had done so all aboard began scurrying around, eager to meet their destinations and begin doing whatever it was that they had come here to do.

Joseph waited, feeling no need to wrestle with the masses on board for a place in line, choosing instead to simply perch himself on a bench, belongings at his feet, and take in the first glimpses he had ever seen of Africa. The buildings in the foreground were white and rigid like those on the isle of Santorini, the people were whiter and of better dress than Joseph had envisioned. The wind was beginning to subside as the clouds gave way, allowing Joseph his first unperturbed taste of the African sun. It pelted him, knocked him through, and forced him to shield his eyes as its rays began to dig themselves into his

skin, making him forget about everything else that was happening. The wind soon picked up and the clouds gave cover once again, but the memory of that first encounter with the African sun stood fresh and clean. The scurrying of souls caught his attention once again as he noticed a disturbance at the end of the dock. What it was Joseph could not tell, but it caused a flurry of activity that sent dozens of men jogging in its directions. He looked around and noticed that the ship had emptied much quicker than he had anticipated so he picked himself and his bags up and strolled out of the mammoth beast.

From the point of Algiers and with the gate of Azun behind him he looked over the sea in a gaze of retribution and pondered the choice he had made. The city was scorching and the people seemed unfriendly, filled to the brim with beggars and pushy women. The sounds of the mosque filled the background as his nose filled with the smells of vendors and puppeteers narrowing the boroughs. His mind seemed to whisper to him the words of Camus, of that missionary he wrote of that came to this place to spread the good word only to be made captive and have his beliefs ripped from him. He thought of the Barbary pirates under Barbarossa that settled here and launched their campaigns of terror, with complete disregard they pervaded the lives of their European counterparts across the sea, killing thousands and enslaving the scores they came across on their raids terrifying all of the most powerful nations of Europe. For all the talk of reformation and renaissance that penetrated their world they seemingly lived in ignorance of the only threat that sincerely struck at their existence.

When Joseph turned around things started to settle down, his mind stopped racing as his thoughts became clear. The lunatic within had been subdued and the cold rationalist

had broken through, needing only now to plot move after move across the breadth and depth of the great continent.

Chapter 7

"The air hurt, the people were spry, I spent my time just trying not to cry"

- From the memories of a confused little girl.

Joseph headed south, staying in Algiers just long enough to secure a few more of the provisions he thought he would need to begin his trip. Before long he had himself on a bus headed for a distant town he could not pronounce on the shore of the Sahara. On the bus ride down the landscape of this new land took shape before Joseph's eyes. Once they had left the outskirts of the city there was nothing except the African terrain. Crossing over the slopes and valleys of the Atlas mountains he wished himself to be versed in the geologies, believing that only then could he come to an adequate understanding of what it was that he was now seeing.

"The distance traversed was 285 miles, or about 210 miles in a straight line, and in a direction nearly north and south. No eruptive rocks were observed. The oldest rock is a boss of mica-schist and gneiss behind the city of Algiers; it forms a low anticlinal, with a H. and S. strike. The pass through the gorge of the Chifla in the Lesser Atlas shows hard slaty rocks dipping S. at a high angle; they are repeated as an anticlinal on the south side of the higher part of the Tell plateau, and are probably Mecsozoic. In the plain separating the Tell from the Haute Plateaux, and on the south side of the latter, red and yellow sandstones form anticlinals; these rocks resemble the Hunter in mineral characters, and are overlain by red marls resembling the Keuper. In the northern escarpment of the Haute Plateaux soliferous marls ure exposed, interstratified between the sandstones and below the red and grey marls. Crystals of salt and gypsum are intimately mixed with the grey marls ; and the so-called " Bochers de Sel" are capped with great blocks of rock tumbled about in confusion, the position of which the author ascribes to the failure of support due to the solution of the salt in the underlying salt-marls. A thin series of bright red and green marls is seen to overlie the Red Sandstones in several places ; and above this is an immense series of dark grey marls, interstratified with argillaceo-calcareous bands, forming a great synclinal of the Hauts Plateaux, and a contorted mass on the Tell plateau. These are probably cretaceous." [9]

Catching himself before his mind wandered too far he decided it time again to record that which was happening around him as the bus came to a slow stop at the edge of a little town…

[9] George Maw, Geological Notes on a Journey from Algiers to the Sahara. Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society. 1874; 30: 105-123

The first thing that greeted us as we arrived was a solitary soldier standing in front of what seemed to be the only road into town next to a fence littered with red stars. After sitting there for a while for no apparent reason, we were finally allowed entry. But before that our Algerian driver, who fancied himself something of a tour guide, decided to serenade us with a song, from what I gathered it was a song welcoming us to this great and prosperous land. It's going to be hard to properly describe the living conditions that I saw in Algeria, but I'll do my best.

Never before have I seen such a stark contrast in living standards, infrastructure, housing, city planning and various other characteristics of a society as I had from going from North to South. Everything looked and felt different, and by different I guess what I really mean is worse. Paved roads were the only amenity they seemed to have, however right beside it they had an open sewer river running all through town. You could also easily tell from the look of the people that we passed that you had stepped into a new world. Most everyone was adorned in some shade of brown, black or grey, of ceremonial or religious form. What was surprising was that all of these people seemed to be constantly moving around and going somewhere, where they were going, I can only imagine, nevertheless it was odd to see that a people living in such abject poverty were constantly on the go, busying themselves with whatever it is that might need attending to. Maybe part of the reasoning for that is that it takes a long time for them to get from point A to point B seeing as there are almost no cars, the only vehicles that seemed to be present were bikes with little red stars on the front of them, which almost everyone had and almost everyone used to get wherever it was that they were going.

The towns we passed were horrible sites to take in. Everything cold and gray, faceless buildings, with nameless streets, and ugly architecture.. In the middle of the city there also lays a giant statue of some far gone leader while scattered here and there were propaganda posters and slogans all depicting either the greatness of the leaders, or proud displays of Algerian soldiers protecting children, or something else of the sort.

Finally, the most unique characteristic pertaining to Algeria, and the one thing I will probably remember more then any other was the constant military presence that I saw in any and all parts of the South that I visited. It seemed as though everywhere you looked in the city there was a man in military apparel standing somewhere performing some kind of task, whether it was conducting what little traffic there was(because there were no street lights), or guarding some building, or checking the tire pressure on someone's bike, or just kind of standing there, there they were, everywhere and anywhere. Not only was this presence felt and seen in the city, but in the rural areas as well. The rural area itself was a site to see, a barren, hilly wasteland with little villages and houses scattered in between. The earth was brown and covered with blotches of green, puddles of water, and the odd tree here and there. The agricultural practices also looked outdated, as rice terraces seemed to have been randomly scattered in all places including backyards, hill tops and basically anything that's not a ditch or a mountain. The country side is also not without its share of military presence, although here it is even stranger as every couple of hundred meters stands a solitary guard at attention. What makes it weirder is the places they are in, some standing in the middle of a rice field, another in the middle of a dirt road, another on top of a hill in the distance.

The long bus ride ended and Joseph found himself in the remote part of the world that would be his destination. He stepped off the bus and was immediately hit hard by the sweltering heat, although he had expected to experience something like this, he was still surprised by the impact that it immediately had on him. Over the course of the next several days he would find the heat becoming more and more discouraging as it was never ending and there was little he could do to avoid its overpowering presence. Nonetheless, he did not let it stifle him at that moment as he went and grabbed his backpack and began trekking in a direction which he believed to be east, but wasn't entirely sure.

The town itself was small in stature and sat frighteningly close to the desert. Joseph spent a month in this place, trying to get himself accustomed to the weather, meeting what locals he could, reading whatever he could and recording his observations in his notebook. The first friend of his he was to make was the owner of the motel he happened to be staying at, Jajel, an exceedingly kind man who was thrilled by the prospect of housing a man from a remote part of the world. His line of questioning rarely ceased, but his intentions were good. He let Joseph know what there was to see and do as well as hinting as to how he should spend his time. Joseph was usually a sweaty mess whenever he saw the man, which only gave the man pride in his own ability to deal with the scourges of heat that nature threw at them.

And so Joseph slept in the strange town, blissfully unaware of the world he had chosen to inhabit, knowing only that he could now find some time to rest, to recollect and to advance his spirit to whatever goal lay ahead of it.

He plopped on the bed and lay for a while yet unable to close his eyes and wander away into his dreams for his mind had still too much to make sense of to possibly let him drift asunder. He thought about the long journey he had made that ended in this place, about the glimpse of the desert that he had caught on the bus as it rode into town, about the decisions that led him here, and about what he would do with the days that followed. He knew nothing of the place, could scarcely recollect the name, and knew that he would probably not find here anyone who spoke decent English. Trepidation crept over him when he thought of what the midday sun would be like on the day that followed. He had always found immense heat to be a deterrent to productivity and knew that tomorrow the wrath of the sun would be felt by him as never before. But at the moment the air was cool, his window was open and a breeze that swept across the Sahara was seeping its way in. He felt its presence first on his toes and then gradually over his entire body before sleep came over him, dreamless sleep.

As noon of the next day approached he went off with Jajel in search of a place that only he seemed to know of. Joseph had let Jajel know that he planned to stay with him for an undetermined amount of time, Jajel being the host that he is, was determined to get for Joseph all of the things that he thought Joseph might need. Despite Joseph's best attempts he was unable to convince his host that such an excursion would not be necessary.

The day was long and the sun was just as bad as Joseph feared it would be. They reached the market after a seven kilometer drive along rubble road in a vehicle that barely made it. Before he knew it they had secured seventeen two liter bottles of coca cola, six packs of hot dogs, five packs of buns, a gallon of ketchup, thirty bags of potato chips, and

fifty two individual rolls of toilet paper, half way through Jajel's shopping binge Joseph had given up trying to convince the man that he did not need these things.

When they came back to the inn Jajel immediately went to work preparing an authentic American meal for his guest that included three cold hot dogs with large scoops of ketchup on each, two sides of potato chips, and half a liter of coke. He beamed with delight as he handed Joseph his tray and then stood over him watching every bite that he took.

When Joseph finally freed himself from the man's clutches he went up to his room to escape the heat. He flung off his sweat drenched clothing and laid himself and his now aching stomach along the floor of the bathtub letting the water rise slowly. With each inch that the water ascended Joseph felt himself becoming more and more at ease, starting from the heels of his feet, up the crevasses of his back, and through his neck until his chin skimmed the surface. He laid there until his skin began to wrinkle as if to tell him that this was no way to spend his time here.

He dried and dressed himself before heading out of his little hotel room he saw that a small crowd had gathered outside of his front door awaiting his exit. He scanned the faces in the crowd and saw that many of them were from the market he had visited earlier that day. The crowd invited Joseph to come with them to a gathering square where Joseph was led around like cattle from person to person before being seated in a semicircle with some of the older members of the group while everyone else stood around. They were all infinite in their curiosity and Joseph eventually was moved to regale them with a story. Despite the fact that few of them seemed capable of

comprehending what he said, their persuasion moved him time and again to continue speaking.

“The day began without event” (My god he speaks!) “we walked for kilometers on end with the sun to our backs. In the distance we could see the birds, the elephants and all creatures of the forest awakening from their eternal slumber, never before had the world awoken itself like it had on this day, it was as if every animal in the jungle was waking up for the first time, their morning noises began to sound like rhythmic beats of a far away orchestra”. On and on and on Joseph went spilling out all of his remaining energy into telling the greatest story any man ever has.

The silence of the crowd made Joseph boast and gesticulate all the more emphatically as he reached the story's climax. “We arrived in the middle of the late afternoon sun to the barren island, set amidst its extra reverence and extraordinary ability to contemplate all that was going on within its little square. The island appeared before us like the moon to the tides of the waves, caressing it and ebbing its flow to and forth to such an extent that it pleases no one yet provided eternal satiation for all those enriched by it”. Joseph realized that he was no longer making much sense, he was also growing tired of the spectacle that had drawn on much longer than necessary and so chose to indicate by his tone that with those last words the story had finished. The faces on the people in the crowd told of their disappointment, but begrudgingly some of them started to get up, others went to get him some food and with a full stomach he was left to dream himself to sleep with all the fanciful tales he just told.

As his celebrity in the town grew, the circle of those that considered themselves friends grew with it. There was of course Jajel, always overly willing to help with any

want or desire Joseph may have, laundry, English newspapers, hot dogs, all were easily handled by this elderly gentleman.

There were also the waiters at the little restaurant at the end of the street which had a large selection of stews and friend rice dishes. He ate there whenever possible to avoid whatever Jajel might surprise him with next. The food proved itself to be more than edible and would afford him all the sustenance he would need for his time here.

At the opposite end of town, no more than a five minute walk - but which seemed like much more on the really hot days - sat the grocer whose name never stuck but who Joseph would go to every other day or so when he wanted some fruit or something other than coke to drink. The man who attended the store was a boisterous fellow who took great pride in his English skills and would never fail to strike up a conversation with Joseph. He'd rant and rave about pictures he once saw of the statue of liberty or something he had heard about the Grand Canyon or about California girls. Mundane as the talks usually were, Joseph enjoyed them for their simplicity and for the great exuberance with which the man told them. He beamed with pride every time he had the opportunity to introduce Joseph to a friend of his and would never pass on the chance to flaunt his English in front of them.

The other major characters in Joseph's Algerian life were three students that spent their days in the local Madrasah and their evenings roaming around town. The parents of these young adults were delighted by the prospect of Joseph having befriended their sons for it gave them a chance to practice their English in a natural setting. Their thoughts were filled with dreams of the outside world and would often come to Joseph with a bounty of fresh questions. The three of them had done much to build Joseph's reputation

as the most knowledgeable of men in town when it came to matters of the surrounding world and as a result Joseph often found himself giving diatribes about what life was like around the world to a variety of new strangers everyday. Joseph reveled in his reputation, and while he tried as best he could to be honest, would often fudge details to make the stories all the more fanciful for his ignorant onlookers.

The three young men, Azur, Balai and Rakem, when they had grown bored of reveling in Joseph's stories, would propose alternate forms of entertainment ranging from sneaking off to elicit drinks from the elders to just wandering aimlessly through the market square. Time and again they would ask Joseph to come along, yet nearly every time he graciously declined.

However there came a day when the boys had a special treat for him. Ever since Joseph had arrived in this place he had sought to procure for himself some peyote. Joseph hadn't always been the type to experiment, but he found himself coming around to the idea that a little here and there could do no real harm, if only he dabbled. Besides, all his life he had been acutely aware of all the great men that had been users and abusers themselves. Freud's systemic use of cocaine, Voltaire's habit for methamphetamines, Napoleon's penchant for tartar emetic, Robert Kennedy's delight in Heroin, Euripides perilous addiction to opium, on and on the list could go. He thought about them on this day and used them to justify the action he was about to take.

Since it was known to Joseph that the drug of choice in this part of the world was peyote, he had asked, with the spirit of those great men in mind, if the boys knew where any could be found. Giddy with delight the boys informed Joseph that on this day they had arranged a meeting with some Bedouins living on the outskirts of town.

The meeting went as smooth as such a meeting could possibly go and before they had really come to understand what was happening the four intrepid vagabonds had the licentious stuff in their possession. They then wandered off to the abandoned huts of Ain Salah, two kilometers south of the Bedouin encampment.

With the setting in place the four cohorts began to indulge. Not knowing how much to take they split the bounty into four equal shares and then proceeded to light and inhale, leaving nothing behind. With giddy anxiety the boys sat in silence waiting for the effects to take hold. Joseph, beginning to feel uneasy as he didn't know for certain what was about to come over him, proposed to the other three that they should take a stroll to a nearby oasis. With an air of apprehension the boys picked themselves up and began guiding the soon to be beleaguered stranger through the desert night.

The desert is an exceedingly tranquil place to be in its few hours of darkness each day, when the torrid sun no longer bothers the living with its glare, leaving behind the cool air to suffuse all. Looking in all directions Joseph could not help but take in the absolute beauty of the night sky, its endless array of tiny bright dots gave him an intimate view into life's creation as he speculated as to where it all might have……

Chapter 8

And recognizing that I was alive,

The shades – they seemed to be things twice dead – drew

Amazement from the hollows of their eyes.[10]

-Dante, Purgatory.

He awoke face down in grass as pain crept over him, throbbing at first in his head and then moving towards his throat and chest. The rest of his senses awoke, he felt the cold wet dew, heard the sounds of birds and began to be aware of the fact that he had no idea where he was. Joseph struggled to remember but only to be struck again by a series of repressing sensations. The throbbing in his head would not subside, he rolled onto his side only to feel a sharp stabbing pain emanating from just below his right knee. He

[10] Dante Alighieri, Purgatorio, Allen Mandelbaum, Bantam Books. 1980, pg. 326,

strained again to recollect all that he had forgotten, only to have the beating of his brain begin anew. And so he lay in an agonizing pain which left no room for fear of the strange new environment he found himself in.

Bearing all of his might Joseph soon managed to drag his back up off the forest floor and began to ground his bearings. The sun had just come up, though little light was penetrating the forest floor. A gentle breeze rustled through the treetops as birds sang, monkeys climbed and lizards scurried about. Joseph slowly got to his feet, the ever-present pain still leaving no room for trepidation. He trudged along in slow but determined strides, walking, just for a few moments was enough to breathe some life into his beleaguered body, and even though many of his muscles and joints were sending stinging signals to his brain, he did not stop moving.

On and on he hobbled in a direction he did not know. It would not take long for another pressing desire to make itself known, hunger, deep, penetrating hunger that almost made him keel over. He could feel his body diverting what fat reserves he had to his stomach. High and low he looked with a desperate, voracious glean, but nothing was to be found. He could never know how long it had been since he had eaten anything but guessed it to be the longest laps of nourishment he had had his entire life for his body was reacting in a way he had never known before. In a last ditch effort he ripped off some leaves and bit down in an attempt to eek out whatever sustenance they held. Aside from some liquid there was little else.

Indulging in the sweet treats of nature's effervescent bounty, Joseph began to realize how much trouble it was that he was in; no water, no known way of getting any real food, no definite sense of where he was, no recollection of how it was that he came

to be here, a leg that probably needed medical attention, nothing to cushion his feet from the terse floor, and a strange jungle lurking all around him. Yet still fear, in all its demonic glow, had not crept over. Perhaps it was because his brain was still not working properly from the level of intoxication it had endured. Nonetheless, the leaves had done their part in satiating him for the time being and he could think of nothing better to do but keep walking in the direction he had chosen.

Hours passed, nothing changed, the jungle in front of him seemed to be getting bigger with each step, the leaves had lost the sense of nourishment they had once had and now Joseph was beginning to think long and hard about where his next meal would come from. Also, as his brain and all of its cognitive functions was rekindling as he thought about all of the ways in which he could have come to be in this situation while under the influence of that terrible hallucinogen. He couldn't have possibly spent more than a few hours, perhaps a day at most, getting to the spot in the jungle that he found himself in when he woke, he thought to himself that if he followed a steady path he would soon find his way out. But a terrifying thought popped abruptly into his head. What if he had chosen the wrong direction, thus moving farther into the jungle and subsequently digging his own grave with every step? Simultaneously the thought of food and the knowledge that he was completely alone began to plague him, it boiled into a deep fear that nearly sent him into a seizure, his legs giving way as he crumpled to the floor, weeping.

A few minutes went by before cold calculating reason took over and he could again think practically about how he would attain the food he so desperately needed. With his face hovering just above the earth he saw a worm digging itself into the ground. Joseph watched it struggle to burrow itself down, displacing minute pebbles of earth as it

descended, millimeter by millimeter, into mother earth's warm embrace. When the last of its tail could no longer be seen Joseph brought his hand up and stabbed it into the dirt. With a scooped hand he shoveled at the ground until the worm, a grub, some ants and another insect he could not identify had been uncovered. He placed them, wriggling away, into his palm, and while still covered in little bits of dirt he flung them into his mouth. Clenching his jaws together he felt the juices from the little bastards ooze all through his mouth. The taste was vile and left him unable to chew again so he just closed his eyes and swallowed.

With the most immediate of needs met he got up and continued walking. The physical drain of the challenge in front of him began to take centre stage in his mind. Hiking, a menial task at best, glorified walking for most, leisurely excursion for some, had not only become Joseph's lone means of survival but also his sole source of recreation. The necessity to urinate came over him, puzzled by how little water he had been drinking but relieved that he finally had control over when to experience some relief. He let the sensation linger and held out as long as he could before succumbing to it, at this point he was clinging to anything that could distract him from his torment.

The hike soon became completely unbearable and Joseph contemplated several times stopping to sprawl out on the forest floor before reminding himself of the dire situation he was in. Joseph came to rely on a remedy he had discovered long ago on his many long walks home from school as a boy when he would pay little attention to his surroundings, only allowing himself enough sense to keep his feet moving but diverting most of his energies towards letting his imagination roam into worlds beyond.

Joseph had, for as long as he lived, believed that it was his otherworldly imagination that separated him from all the other people he knew. He was remembering a time in his life when he was much younger and his favorite times of the day would be his long walks home when he would have nothing to occupy him but his own vivid imagination. Oh, the stories and tragedies he would play out in his head, and with such clarity and lucidity that they easily beat any television show he would ever watch or any video game he would ever play. In them, of course, he was the star, always some kind of awe-inspiring super hero whose abilities had no limits and whose nature was as subtle and kind as Joseph's always imagined his own to be. His story line usually didn't deviate too far from an ascribed path, one in which the hero would be faced with insurmountable odds, where he would have to risk life and limb just to escape from a given situation in tact, and where in the end he would have to give everything he had just short of dying to overcome whatever evils he was confronting. The images that would splash before Joseph's mind in those moments were enough to fill his being with such energy and excitement that he had no need for extravagant games and the toys that his friends possessed.

And so on this most intolerable of occasions he did all that he could to let his imagination take control and distract him from the misery threatening to engulf him. However this time the images that splashed before him had matured, they were no longer filled with muscle-bound superheroes but modern day characters that left Joseph feeling dry inside. Imagined encounters with great men and personal hero's appeared; from Zadig to Thucydides, Archimedes to Planck, on and on and on these images filed through in a roundabout way, none with enough substance to sustain itself.

Joseph, perturbed by his defeat and the realization that his imagination may not be what it once was, chose to picture something far less extraordinary, that moment when he would be in his hotel room and finally be capable of reflecting on the ordeal he was now involved in, that moment when the long perilous journey would have reached its ultimate conclusion. When he would be able to take a bucket shower and get some clean clothes on only to lie in a big soft bed. Maybe he would pick up a book, read only a few pages, then lay it open on his stomach and watch his steady breathing bob the book up and down. Gradually his stare would float upwards and he would watch the wobbly ceiling fan turn itself round and round again. In that moment he could remember everything that he was currently going through and all the things that he had seen but had neither the time nor the energy to take in, those images that come through clearest, and can be best understood, when lying in bed thinking about the wide open spaces of the savannah or lush greenery of the forest. The memories would continue to sway and swirl about in his head, where he could make them even more romantic than they already were. After hours of complete relaxation he'd get up and find the best restaurant around. There'd be roasted duck, lobster glistening in butter and a bottomless jug of Kölsch beer. He would eat and eat and eat till the feeling of euphoria had passed and been replaced by that gnawing pain one has when you're just too full, when you can do nothing else but climb back into bed under the cool wind of the fan and waste away. Completely satiated. Oh what a thing it is to be so completely satiated, a moment when one needs nothing else in the world but to fully embrace themselves in their given moment, when every bone and muscle, desire and need had been satisfied. As happy as a lion he'd stretch himself out, close his eyes and drift off into sleep for as long as possible.

Joseph looked down and saw that his feet were bleeding, felt his aching ankles, his swelling knee, his dry mouth and knew that he was unconsciously tired, so much so that his very senses seemed to be misfiring. While preventing himself from thinking too much he laid himself down on the forest floor, tucked his arms under his head and closed his eyes.

As he began to drift off to sleep, he felt as though he were slipping into a coma. A sudden urge to snap himself awake came over him as the fear of all the things that may happen to him while asleep on a strange forest floor came over him, but it was too late, his cognitive faculties had given way to a part of his brain that had been lying dormant all his life and now began to consume him entirely. The next thing Joseph knew, he had awoken in his first of many dreams to come. These were unlike any other dreams he had ever had, more clairvoyant than anything he had ever known, images that would henceforth become part of his experiences and shape his reality.

It was a bright sunny day and he was sitting at the edge of a dock holding a fishing pole, to his right was his grandfather. At the time little Joseph was no more than ten years old and was weary of having to spend the entire day fishing with his father and grandfather. All through the day he was being taught, taught in the same way that he had been taught before, and making the same mistakes that he had always made. Time and again his line would get tangled or he would be unable to properly hook the worm or remove the hook from the fish or jerk the pole at the right moment, and time and again his father would be there to scold him.

Just then little Joseph had a bite, not a big one, but enough to get him and his grandfather excited. Joseph quickly jumped to his feet, and for the first time that day he managed to wait patiently before making that all important tug of the line that would send the hook's serrated teeth into the jaw of the helpless little fish. He drowned out the voices all around him, stared out into the area of water where the bobber had disappeared and snapped back on the pole. The tug of war was on and he leaned and reeled and pulled emphatically till at long last the shimmering scales could be seen just in front of them. He wouldn't have cared to bring it all the way in if not for the excitement it was bringing to the grown men on either side of him who were both emphatically shouting directions.

When he finally lifted the fish up and out of the water his heart sank as he was quick to notice a problem for the hook was not placed, as it should have been, on the jaw, rather it was deep inside the things belly. Joseph stared at the fish, not really knowing what to do as it hung there flopping in mid air. With quick wit his grandfather grabbed the fish with one hand, the line with the other, and yanked the hook out with one mighty tug. Out came everything, before the line and hook came the gizzard, lungs, kidney and liver, before the heart itself pooped out and bounced along the wooden floor of the dock eeking out its last beats. A tiny minnow that was still being digested but whose head was still recognizable also gushed forth from deep inside the fish's stomach. The old man stood there for a brief moment holding up the line in one hand, whose weights and hook were covered in all sorts of disgusting mass, and in the other the little bass whose life had just been sucked out of him, no longer wiggling, just limp in the hands of Joseph's grandfather. Then the old man tossed the little fish into a bucket, wrapped some of the

intestines around the hook, stabbed the lungs with its pointed tip and gave the boy back his line.

He stared at Joseph with a solemn look on his face and said, “Popatrz, tak sie lowi ryby”.

Joseph next found himself in the middle of an African Savannah wearing nothing but his favorite pair of shoes. As he stood there pontificating with his wiener blowing in the wind he found himself strongly comforted by the fact that he was at least wearing his much beloved shoes. He looked down at them, black laces, black soles, black covering with a silver Nike emblem emboldened along the sides. When he looked above them he saw beneath him a set of the finest legs the world had ever seen, as if crafted out of molten lava and shaped by a master sculptor. Just above the shoes protruded an achilles tendon spiked and rounded like a blunt instrument of war. Above them stood perfect slopes of flesh that shaped themselves into what looked like the calf muscle of a horse with veins popping and protruding from all places, the sun cast a shadow right below the calf which made it beam to the world with all its might. On the opposite side muscles he never knew existed gleamed in the light, lean and ready for work. Just above them began the formation of knees, definitive, symmetrical knees. Over them stood more mounds of muscle that spurted forth from both sides of his legs, enormous thighs that had their own hills and valleys. Not a millimeter of fat was to be seen, only rock solid weight, the work of millions of amino acids that had come together as if sanctioned by providence.

Suddenly all of his leg muscles began throbbing, begging to begin doing their work, and just like that they took off and Joseph ran and ran and ran towards the African sun…

He walked through a market as though floating in a cloud, never had he felt as free. The only person in a sea of black faces in a place as hectic as any. Just passing through and looking at all that was there, big yellow mangoes, red turnips and green cabbage. And then there she was, tucked away on the second floor crouching down next to a pile of dried out plantains. Her beautiful black skin, full breasts and angelic face were, in that moment, the perfection of the feminine form. She rose up out of her chair and was transformed, the background went black as her face became pale and her hair stood up in a bow with red chopsticks shooting in out of the darkness to run through them. She now had white pupils and black scleras. Only her soft face could be seen as she leaned her plump red lips up to his ear and whispered…

Do not boast of leaving so early.

When you venture out to the sea, it will be difficult to return.

The full bright moon above the empty mountain,

how about staying here to rest.[11]

A tree on a hill looking out in every direction. Firm branches with a powerful trunk full to the brim with leaves that reached towards the sky in every direction. It had beefy roots that had dug themselves hundreds of meters into the earth both vertically and

[11] Hwang Jin Yi

horizontally. The tree had no need for vision as it knew every movement all around by the vibrations that resonated to and through its roots. Hundreds of feet away a horse was trotting along, the tree felt its presence and knew that it was pulling a heavy carriage. The horse galloped along diligently, over the rubble, gravel, and dirt, each step moving the soil, which disturbed the sedentary, which shook the root underneath, which then tingled the hundreds of meters back to the trunk of the vast tree. On this day it was the contents of the carriage's load that drew the tree's attention. With every step of the horses and each rotation of the wheels the tree got a better sense of its direction and subsequent destination along with the contents on board. When it finally deduced what it had strived to know the great plant shivered with fear for it too would soon see judgment passed over it.

And with the memories of those dreams imprinted Joseph awoke. He could barely make out all of the things that just happened deep within the cortex of his mind as he lay there just trying to piece together all of its events. Suddenly it all came to him in a rush of experience, those legs, the fish, the woman, and above them all a tree so tall and firm that a thousand lumberjacks could never take it down, memories that Joseph could never forget.

Before he had time to fully contemplate what his next move would be, or even to realize once again the horrible state of affairs he was in, Mr. Rapati, a man he would come to know very well but who would prefer to be called Kwame, stepped out of the shadows.

Chapter 9

In a world where good and evil do not exist, nature thrives.

While still lying on the forest floor Joseph looked up and shaded his eyes to get a good look at the man who had just seemingly appeared out of nowhere. He was sturdy, about half a foot shorter than Joseph, and wore simple clothing, brown sandals, blue linen pants, and an opaque colored loose fitting long sleeved shirt. His face was big and round, his hair short and curly, his nose wide and flat, his smile big and filled with yellowing teeth, his eyes brown and wide, his cheeks plump and round, his forehead smooth and protruding, his chin pointed though not strong, his hands big but not rough, his skin dark but not black, his eyebrows bushy but not wild, his ears small but attentive, and his feet were worn but clean.

Joseph began struggling himself into an upright position when Kwame lurched forward and helped him to his feet. Joseph saw in the eyes of this stranger a look of pity as he was being examined, Joseph looked down to see yet again his blood and dirt stained clothing, the rip in his jeans exposing the gash on his leg, and his dirt encrusted hands and feet. He had not the ability at the moment to relate to Kwame all that he had experienced and the reasons for him being in the state that he was, his hunger, and the pain that coursed through his body did not allow him full control over his mental faculties. Kwame, sensing the displeasure that his newly found comrade was feeling, forced Joseph to sit down again as he bent to look over him with a warm grin on his face. Joseph agreed at once, happy to be told what to do and to have the stress of responsibility temporarily alleviated, he quickly found himself putting a lot of unchecked faith into the hands of this man. Though he could not understand the words this man spoke, they produced within Joseph their desired effect. His voice and his actions were kind and sincere and Joseph came to believe him to be motivated by nothing but pure, unbridled altruism. He had not heard the sound of another person's voice for all the time that had passed since he first woke up in the forest, whether that intervening period had been a few days or up to a week Joseph could not tell, they were exasperating, the hardest he had ever lived, and to hear, see, and smell another person instantly coated him with a sense of well being.

Kwame quickly, with all the grace of a man who has lived for a long time in the woods, went off in search of the things he would need to tend to Joseph. Joseph was left alone again for a few moments in bitter agony, the pain had come back in full, standing up had been very unwise and something was burning at the pit of his stomach. Kwame returned with a handful of leaves and flowers and carefully went about taking off

Joseph's dirt and blood encrusted clothing and started a thorough examination. There was a large inflammation over the right kneecap, a deep gash over his left hip, a chunk of the lobe of his left ear had ripped out, something had impaled his second to last toe on his left foot, and his right shoulder had been dislocated. To make matters worse a fever had broken out and some disease or virus was wreaking havoc in places Kwame could not immediately tend to. Thankfully Kwame was as skilled a man as any when it came to the task of survival in these places. His knowledge of his surroundings was surpassed only by his instincts and as he looked upon this man who seemed to be slipping towards death, he felt confidence in his abilities to restore him.

Two days passed, all the while Joseph had been slipping in and out of consciousness while Kwame tended to his wounds, prepared meals, kept a fire blazing and watched over his patient with a sharp eye. At the end of this second day Joseph was finally beginning to show signs that a recovery was possible. He awoke and seemed to be in full control of himself for the first time since they had met. Kwame continued to ensure that Joseph still did not do anything too strenuous. Joseph tried his hand at conversation to extract what information he could pertaining to the place they now inhabited but it did not take them long for the two men to learn that they could not speak to each other as neither knew in full the language that was being used by the other. Joseph believed it to be some obscure French dialect as the accent sounded remotely familiar to the memories he was conjuring up from his days as an elementary school student. Nevertheless, the two men found themselves capable of expressing basic pleasantries with one another as Kwame busied himself with the making of soup.

Sitting there on the barren floor of the strange jungle Joseph felt oddly at ease. Despite the fact that he had just survived the most perilous ordeal of his entire life and that many parts of his body still ached violently, he felt security in the presence of this stranger and no longer consumed himself with the dangers that still faced him.

A few more days passed before Kwame felt that Joseph was well enough to do some walking with the aid of a crutch and a splint. They walked far longer than Joseph had expected, five days in all, increasing the distance passed with each day as Joseph's health steadily improved. Along the way Joseph continued trying to get some sense of where he was and extract whatever information he could from Kwame but still found that they were unable to properly communicate. Instead the trek through the jungle was filled - apart from the normal sounds one might hear in a jungle - with the sounds of song that Kwame burst forth ceaselessly. Joseph realized that his initial deduction was correct, that indeed this language was some offshoot of French and was pleasantly surprised to find himself capable of understanding a few words, though still unable to string any two together. His voice was soothing, Joseph hardly said a word the entire walk but never really felt pressured to, it was as though Kwame was shouldering every burden upon himself, even that of supplying the entertainment.

Finally they emerged from the thickest parts of the jungle, crossed over a field and began snaking their way down a path that rolled along a series of hills and meadows. They cleared the final hill only to find a canyon as grand as any Joseph had ever seen, stretched out in front of them. Lush grass, green trees, yellow birds, gray elephants, blue flowers, red soil, turquoise water, white sand, and black rocks, all lumped together in an

assortment unlike any nature had produced before. Joseph could do nothing but stare in wide eyed wonder at the sight that unfurled beneath him.

While staring in utter disbelief, Joseph slowly started to try giving context to what it was that he was seeing, to piece together some order, anything that could give reason to this place. As far as he knew, he was still somewhere in the Sahara desert, though how a jungle like the one he had just traversed could exist in a desert, or how the present sight came to be he could not fathom. He thought to himself that somewhere in that crazy, peyote induced night of his that he could not remember he had managed to hop on a plane and fly south, past the desert and into a sub Saharan African jungle. That had to be it, what else could possibly explain all of this? But how then would he have gotten on a plane in the shape he was in? He remembered that the boys he had been with had never been on a plane before so it was extremely unlikely that they, or anyone else from the town had managed to get him on one, pass him through an airplane's security, land in some other country, get him to a jungle, and then completely abandon him. Was there a plane crash perhaps? That would explain the injuries, the fact that no one else had been around. But then wouldn't there be some clues in the vicinity of where he had been? Scraps of metal? A parachute? Something.

Kwame, who undoubtedly had taken in the view many times before, busied himself by lying down on the grass, closing his eyes and humming softly. Joseph, after he had spent enough time gazing in awe, turned to Kwame and motioned that he was ready to keep walking, they walked straight down into the valley. In every direction he looked there was something incredible to see and it hit him with a sensory experience so intense that he nearly lost his footing. A whirlwind of colors swarmed all around him, tiny insects

fluttered around in all directions, smells he had never known pervaded every pore in his nostrils. When they reached the valley below, Joseph finally found himself capable of taking his eyes and his mind off the new, wondrous world that had sprung up before him and focused again on walking along the path to their destination.

Several more hours had passed, Joseph felt himself ready to stop and take another rest but each time he tried to do so Kwame pushed him along, urging him forward. At long last they cleared another forest line and walked over one last plateau before reaching a series of huts that would be their destination. Kwame, sensing again the needs of his guest, guided Joseph towards one of the huts where he found for him a bed. Upon seeing it Joseph quickly lay down and in an instant he was asleep.

Chapter 10

Human interactions have meaning only when we thrust meaning upon them.

The night passed, the following morning came and went, and only when the midday sun had begun its descent had Josephs' still weakened body begun to awaken. When his mind became clear he took some time to try and make sense of all that had just happened to him. The desert, the peyote, the forest, Kwame, and the garden where he presently found himself all flashed before his eyes. An incredible sense of wonder enveloped him as he thought about the majestic sights he had witnessed in this place the previous evening and as quick as he could he dressed himself in his dirty attire, the only

clothing he had left, the ensemble that had carried him through his entire time spent in the jungle, and marched outside.

Upon opening the door he saw, at a distance of a hundred or so yards ahead, children running about in an open field. He watched as they scampered about before running en masse into the line of trees behind them and out of sight. The sun was still strong as Joseph felt its heat enveloping him, the sky was a spotted spectrum of blue and white. Out of his periphery he caught sight of Kwame who motioned for Joseph to follow him towards a scattered array of huts that he could make out in the distance at the opposite edge of the forest line.

He followed obediently and upon arrival surmised the destination to be Kwame's home as he did not knock but just slipped off his sandals and strolled in. Inside an array of foods had been laid out and the two men sat down for the first of many meals Joseph would have in this place. There were fish, cheeses, breads, and an assortment of fermented vegetables and fresh fruits. Joseph was beyond starving and engaged in few pleasantries as he helped himself to anything and everything within reach. Unfortunately for Joseph his stomach was coming to capacity much quicker than he would have liked. Full, he tried engaging himself in conversation and began with, "Je pense que le…" before Kwame placed a hand on his arm and signaled that not only did he not understand, but that there would be no need for it at the moment. Instead, once the food stopped weighing them down Kwame led Joseph back to the room he had spent the previous night in and left him there.

Digesting the food he had consumed was taking up the bulk of his energy and his body as a whole was still very weak from the ordeal in the forest that he had only recently been alleviated from. And so he sat on the porch and stared out into this new world.

The sky was beginning to turn a new shade of blue as it began the process of turning day into night. To the right he made note of the terrain that slowly sloped upwards towards a plateau where the tops of a few more huts could be seen. To his immediate left were a few more homes, much like the one he currently found himself in, though it seemed as though no one was living within them. Beyond them was a wide field that he had just crossed and in the distance was Kwame's home. Just to his right he saw a hummingbird floating between bright red flowers that reached out from the vines that engulfed the house. Directly in front of him at a distance of hundred or so yards began the forest line that stretched as far as he could see in either direction. He sat for roughly an hour, scanning to the left and the right, all the while coming up with ever more fanciful explanations of where he was and how this place came to be before acknowledging that he was once again very tired and headed back inside to get some more sleep.

He awoke in what was now the third of his days spent in this place. After showering he re-entered his bedroom adjacent to the shower and saw that a clean set of clothes had been laid out for him, a loose fitting pair of gray pants, a plain white t-shirt, and sandals. Strolling outside in his clean new clothes, he looked about him and noticed on the plateau above a woman looking directly towards him. At that distance Joseph could not accurately surmise her figure but saw that it was shapely, that her face and her arms were deeply tanned, and that her hair was long and hung in a ponytail. She gave a courteous and succinct wave and then sauntered off into the distance.

Joseph, without any idea of what he should do next, decided it best to go back to Kwame's. Upon arrival he knocked a few times before letting himself in. Within he saw food once again sitting in the middle of the floor with a plate and utensils ready to be used. Though it was not his custom to do so, he helped himself to the bounty before him.

Just as he was finishing Kwame's wife came in through the doorway behind him. At once Joseph had felt her presence and turned his head quickly to meet her eyes and get a sense of her opinion at seeing him there, uninvited in their home, devouring the food that had been set. Joseph, while thinking about the misdeed he was currently engaged in had turned a slight red and knew that a look of embarrassment had crossed over his face. She, upon meeting his eyes, only bowed her head before quickly venturing off to the kitchen and returning with speed carrying a glass of water. Without saying a word she placed it lightly before Joseph, cleared his dishes and went back into the kitchen. All the while Joseph could not help but stare at his hostess who was doing all that she could to portray for her guest all the signs of a welcoming home. She was beautiful in her old age, smooth crested skin, well groomed hair and pleasing facial features.

Kwame entered, and after helping himself to some fruit and a few words with his wife, led Joseph out of the house and into that of a neighbor a few hundred paces away where an elderly woman was tending to some plants on a windowsill. She lifted her head once the two had cleared the doorway and began to move her lips as out poured in an accent unfamiliar,…

"Hello, nice to meet you"

Joseph was visibly stunned, and as though he had forgotten the language took a few seconds to respond before engaging in conversation. They sat and talked for a while,

Joseph hurled questions at her with such pace and fervor that the women, in her broken English, could barely keep up. Nevertheless, Joseph was able to surmise a good deal about this place from their conversation, though some of the more pertinent questions remained a mystery.

For one they referred to this place only as le jardin. It has existed for roughly three and a half centuries when a small group of weary travelers led by a man of great ambition had plotted the first seeds and decided to settle here and cultivate a garden. The people currently living in the garden were all descendants of those first travelers. While exceedingly modest in its early days, everything now to be seen within its grounds existed solely because the descendants had carried out the work of that first man. Today, one thousand nine hundred and forty three people lived within its grounds, some had wandered within, most could be traced back to those first few.

When asked about its location, Joseline, the woman on the other end of the conversation, seemed unable to come up with an answer. As was the case when Joseph asked how a garden could grow in a desert and where the next closest village might be. Perplexed, Joseph was left with the knowledge that he could stay in the place where he had slept for as long as he needed. If he chose to leave he would have to endure much of what he had previously experienced from his venture into the garden again. She assured him that while it was possible, and while it has happened, it was a difficult undertaking and required weeks upon weeks of hiking through steadily worsening conditions. He shivered with horror at the thought of having to go through that again and decided to stay at least a little bit longer. Oddly enough she had no questions for him apart from how his

health was holding up and if he needed anything else in his home, nothing about how he had come to be in this place, where he came from, or what his plans were.

He spent many of the first couple days walking in abstraction around the garden, familiarizing himself with the place while being as cordial as possible with the people he passed, yet mostly walking around in dumbfounded awe at the marvel that had sprung up all around him. He'd sit for long stretches of time and watch the steady hands of the gardeners, those practitioners of the soil, illustrious men revered throughout the garden for the skills they had honed. They followed in a long line of nature's craftsmen who had perfected any and all techniques necessary for their post; aerating and bedding, bracing and cutting, girdling and grafting, layering and mulching, pruning and pollinating, thatching and topiary, all had been mastered and at every end of the garden they had made their presence felt. Houses draped in curated Azaleas and Virginia Creeper Vines, walkways lined with the subtle effects of Yellow Canna and Indian Senna , plots filled with asymmetrically configured pattern of White California Poppy and Rose Campion, fields of Mongolian Giant Sunflower interspersed with Burmese Parrot Flower, every color man might ever have a name for could be found somewhere on a pedal within these grounds. If anything was sacred here it was the knowledge that these men possessed, for everyone in the garden knew some of the intricacies of the flowers, trees, bushes and the roles they played, but only a handful were endowed with the knowledge needed to tend to each one, thereby ensuring the continued growth of the garden. From the incessant needs of alluvial soils to meticulously maintaining the fertilizer of the Caladium, nothing was beyond their scope. Joseph for his part would come to know the names and functions of

many of the plants he now passed by, of the medicines to be extracted from Begonia or the ointment that can be pressed out of a CornFlower, but for now he was left to revel in his ignorance.

The trees that made up the entirety of the forest that surrounded the garden were known with just as much precision as their diminutive counterparts. Many had practical functions, some marked the passing of seasons, others seemed to be there simply for the amusement of the senses. The anticipation of the Cherry Blossoms that burst with white vigor every April, the poisons extracted from the Kentucky Coffee or Black Walnuts, the meadows of pink Saucer Magnolia and deep purple-red Japanese Emperors whose petals were mended to make an assortment of linens, the oils pressed out of the Kingnut Hickory, the host of nutrients found in the fruit of the African Baobab, the Coast Redwoods that lined the upper echelons of the forest canopy, the Strangler Figs that had wrapped themselves around rocky outcroppings, the precision tools crafted out of the Cedars of Lebanon, the hallowed out Banyans home to thousands of edible insects, the wood of the Montezuma Cypress used in the construction of every home in the garden, the ropes fashioned out of the Raffie Palms, or the multifarious Giant Bamboo used in everything from treating infections to scaffolding.

And then there were the animals, great glorious animals who had accustomed themselves to life in a particular corner of the garden but who lived in interplay with its people, forest and open spaces. The large sweeping plains are home to hosts of African Elephants, Malagasy Hippopotamuses, Spotted Hyenas, and Rothschild Giraffes. Marshy swamp lands filled with Goliath Beatles, Chinese Giant Salamanders, Antillean Crested Hummingbirds, Tree Frogs, and Asian Small Clawed Otters. The forest with its North

Chinese and Amur Leopards, Silverback Gorillas, Howler Monkeys, Royal Bengal Tigers, Spectacled Bears, and Pig-Deer. The Peregrine Falcon, Pacific Albatross, White-Naped Cranes, and Great Red Hawks filled the skies and went wherever they pleased. Along with swarms of insects, lizards and fish that completed the cycle.

Joseph would spend many of his first days gazing out into the distance at a single crane as it swooped over fields of rice or following a leopard stalk its way along the forest line or just watching a sloth hang in suspension from the branch of a Redwood. How all of these specimens had been gathered here was a question he would never get a straight answer to. Kwame, in his eccentric rhetoric that Joseph would come to know well, would only say, “the questions that bother us most are often the least important”.

After nearly two weeks of wandering he was able to paint a fairly clear picture in his head of what the garden looked like. At the center of which he put the little guest house he stayed which lay at the bottom of a narrow green valley. To the south was where Kwame and a small collection of others lived, beyond them a wide plain and a splattering of swampy marsh lands where most of the rice fields were. To the North the garden snaked East up a plateau where lay the largest array of houses that had been formed into a four layered semi-circle. To its north was the school and library carved out of a mountainside, at the top of which stood a crude observatory that was also the highest easily accessible point in the garden. Continuing north the curve of the garden began to bend west where the fields of crops, orchards and domesticated animals were held. Roughly twenty squared kilometers in all and narrowing to a point on either end, all of which was enclosed by the forest and its innumerable pathways hiding within a host of other yet to be explored areas.

And so his time in the garden had begun, he lived the first few weeks blissfully unaware of the future he would soon consider having in this place. Soon enough Kwame took him to the fields and showed him the work that needed to be done. A routine was set in which every second day Joseph would know what was needed of him. At first it seemed to Joseph that his greatest troubles would come with not knowing when exactly it was he was supposed to do each of the tasks assigned to him as strictly formulated times didn't exist in this place. However, he soon found it liberating to rely solely on the sun, or gut instinct for measuring the passage of time and within a few short weeks he had mastered his schedule and began making the tasks assigned to him as efficient as they could be. In sequential order they appeared as follows.

Day break - wake up, get dressed, put some food in your mouth and head out to start your day.

Crops - reach the fields of grain and begin sewing, labor intensive; bending and scooping and plodding and digging, adding fertilizer and tilling the day's area. Every day the plot to be sowed changed in a rotating manner that covered the breadth of the field that had been appointed to him within three weeks.

Livestock - inspect a chicken coup, gather eggs, remove manure, check the cages, put in feed, monitor the health of the stock. Head to a pigs pen, gather fertilizer, add feed, inspect health. Repeat for cows, rabbits, horses, ostrich and alpaca.

Siesta

Fruits and Vegetables - tend the garden, pick fruit, pluck vegetables, plant seeds, water crops.

These would be Joseph's chores for the remainder. Every third week the order of things would change slightly depending on the weather, the season, and the needs of the community, the rest of his time was his to spend as he pleased.

Chapter 11

"The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom"[12] *- Hegel*

As weeks passed Joseph began to get a sense of the immensity of the garden and was growing increasingly puzzled by the fact that there seemed to be no boundary to the forest. Whenever he inquired into its dimensions he was always met with startled, bewildered faces. Kwame - many months later when Joseph was beginning to come to

[12] Hegel, Philosophy of History, pg. 19

grips with the language - would prefer to launch himself into a plenitude of aphoristic notation; “as big as you want or as small as you need”, “too big even for the imagination of a child”, “a gazelle could run in a direction all its life and never escape”, with each whimsical quote proving more useless than the last. The children regaled Joseph in tales of days, sometimes weeks spent walking entirely in one direction and never coming to a place where the lush greenery of the garden met the barren oceans of the desert that lay at its border. The elderly women would suggest that there was a way, but none ever seemed capable of conjuring up a definitive answer when asked how long such a journey might take. There was one story which Joseph heard about a young man who left and never returned. He was mentioned over dinner but quickly passed over like the talk of floods from generations past.

Joseph was beginning to conjecture into what pretext he could put this place in. He wondered if the garden was as unique as it seemed, after all, jungles exist, and surely there must be another like it somewhere in the world or in the annals of history. Then again, he reminded himself that he also happened to be, as far as he knew, in the middle of the Sahara desert, supposedly a vast, barren wasteland where nothing but the hardiest of vegetation and the most valiant of animals live.

But there was much more than just the geographic anomaly, the people, their society, and the history they have built for themselves must have a point of reference, a comparable class in which they can be placed. He began by drawing comparisons to monasteries and places like them where men gathered in large numbers and surrendered themselves to prayer. He thought of all the places he had heard of and came across a memory given to him by a friend’s uncle of a journey he had to a monastery, a Buddhist

monastery on the eastern shore of Korea. Leveled with tranquility the story had captivated Joseph when first he heard it and made him long for an experience similar to it. Working back from his memory he pieced together a narrative of how the story was once told to him….

I went on a hike to an outcropping of huts which lay on the outskirts of a dank little town, it was a Saturday morning and I was to meet up with some old friends once there. We arrived around four pm, the sun was still high in the sky as we spent the first few hours of that same Saturday roaming about this fresh place. Ancient relics everywhere, sculptures carved into mountains, men with shaved heads adorned in long ceremonial garb walking around, the smell of a fresh autumn evening lingering in the air, and nothing to hear but the sounds of the wind passing through ruffled leaves. The monks had built for themselves modest, yet traditional huts in which to live, while grand temples atop steep hills dotted the terrain.

We had our first meal, all of which would be vegetarian, before being compelled to do some Sun Moo Do training, Sun Moo Do is an ancient Buddhist martial art that attempts to harness your inner energy and the energy of your surrounding environment while mixing in high flying kicks and punches that none of us feeble white men could do. It was hard, involving a lot of stretching, repetitive exercises, odd positions and jumping. After it was finished we were off to bed, by that I mean a wooden floor.

We were woken at four in the morning by a monk callously beating sticks together in our room. After struggling to pull myself off the floor we were herded into a temple at the top of a very steep hill for prayer and meditation. Prayer involved prostrating oneself

over and over again in front a golden Buddha while monks chanted and incense filled the room. Then came meditation time where we sat in the same room for an hour with our eyes closed and our legs forced into a half lotus position. At this point my body was still aching and throbbing from the Sun Moo Do training the night before and my mind was fighting off exhaustion from lack of sleep. To add further insanity to the situation if you dozed off a monk came around and hit you twice on the shoulder with a large wooden stick. All this hours before the sun had even begun to come up.

Following that we had a brisk run around the temple and ate a traditional Buddhist meal where a slab of rice, some seaweed soup and vegetables were plopped into bowls before you, if you didn't finish it all in time you had to drink from some dirty bucket of water to show Buddha how sorry you were for not eating all of that he had bestowed on you. We spent the rest of the day having tea with the elders and visiting other sites in the area including the fabled tomb of King Monmu, buried in the sea hundreds of years ago so he could become a sea dragon and help defend the people from their sworn enemies.

When he finished recollecting he realized that the analogy didn't fit and began to wonder where else he may be able to draw his comparisons from. His mind next moved towards the Bedouin encampment of the Negev. Where men lived as equals with camels and scorpions alike, spending their days cooking, tending to guests and smoking Hookah. Yet only a love for the simple aesthetics of life did they share with the people in this garden.

There were also the Christian monks that lived in obscurity many years ago, Franciscans, Benedictines, Dominicans and others following the model of a great elder that had lived many years ago. In that light it had as much in common with this place as both lived according to one man known only through old books and even older stories. Yet their origins and deontology were radically different from anything Joseph saw in the people and trees of the garden.

Next came to mind the kibbutzim of Israel. Families living side by side for generations, tending to crops, working the tills and plunging themselves into a world that people had lived in far before all that is contemporary. Simple values were all that needed to be upheld for one to find contempt and bliss. However it was still religion or ideologies, which more often than not are one in the same that bound them to their place.

But what was becoming more and more apparent to Joseph was that this place was unique in all the world he had known. For one there was a total void of scripture and theology, belief as a whole seemed to have vacated this place, not once had anyone preached to him about how to live or what one should do or be doing with the days they spent. As Joseph thought about it more and more he wondered how they would have first gone about organizing themselves. All of his life Joseph had been predisposed to believe that man was a political animal, a teaching that seemed infused in the marrow of every man woman and child throughout society. How obvious it had seemed, political orientation was the only thing that all walks of humanity had in common. But there was none here, was it because the people chose to discard it? Did they simply have no need of it? Or were they living blissfully unaware of it all together? As Joseph continued to think about it he realized the answer itself lay in a paradox. As simple as each of Zeno's, but

whose context was innate, at least so long as it applied to humanity, for math lives outside the human realm, while politics lies within.

Then there was Kwame himself, someone who Joseph had been building opinions about but who was still shrouded in mystery. A happy little plod of a man, he was always one to greet you with a smile, a pat on the shoulder and pleasant words. His hair was short and curly, his legs and arms stumpy, his torso worn, his face old and wrinkled, but his eyes were obscenely kind and full of life. One couldn't help but feel better when he laid his gaze upon you.

Whenever Joseph and Kwame would meet the old man would talk and talk sometimes for hours on end about any and all things. It was through him that Joseph was able to learn the language at such a frantic pace and whenever he would run into difficulties with it Kwame would retort, time and again, "Remember Joseph, language is not a tool we craft for it is our maker." Whole days would be spent on lectures pertaining to individual vegetables, or what was in the feed, or how much water was needed at different times in the seasons, or what gradient of a slope was adequate for their survival. At times Kwame would ask for advice and wonder how certain things were practiced in the world that Joseph came from. Joseph for his part would divulge only so much about what he knew, reason being that he still had contempt for certain aspects of the world he left behind and would refrain from bringing them up.

Kwame spoke erratically and often diverged his thoughts into multiple lines of reason. A wise little sage though he was Joseph often felt himself mocking him whenever he would break out into his long tirades. There were long whimsical stories, most of

which went nowhere, and short intense blurbs meant to bestow all of life's valor in a single blow.

These monstrous adages would mount ceaselessly almost every time Joseph bumped into the little man. Kwame would be the sole bearer and apparent author of many, yet some seemed to sprout from the springs themselves….

"Waiting to experience war. It sounds as foolish as anything one could say. Wrapped in it are all the faults associated with romanticism and magnanimity. Nevertheless the thought of it shall linger. To have experienced is the dream, to be in it, the nightmare.

To run the gamut of human experience is what we all strive for, at least the noble among us. Yet to have it and all the wisdom it brings with it means to have lived through the utmost of pleasures, extreme ecstasy and the greatest of sorrows, namely death of something loved. But each rung in this ladder is equal in importance and constitutes a necessity of being, vicariousness can only take one so far, bathing in the sensory experience constitutes the ultimate."

"A pear tree once sprouted will never shrink
A squirrel once born will never be dumber
A storm once brewed will never rise up the same again
A house once built could never be truly duplicated
But a man once told will inevitably have to be told again."

"Five way paths once folded upon themselves

They bent and strived to narrow the fur

But on seeing they were alive

One must gather the spurs"

"A bull and a frog met one day in an apple orchard. Before them was a bucket the size of a bathtub filled to the brim with bright green apples. The bull stared at it intently, raised his front hoofs, grabbed the enormous bucket by its gargantuan handle and raised it high off the ground. When he finished exerting himself he turned to the frog, flexed his biceps, gave a loud snort of superiority and then lay on the grass to dream of Elysian Fields.

The frog peered at the bull through its bulging eyes and grew white with anger. As the bull was napping he set about meticulously twining together pieces of grass till he had a rope as long as the orchard itself. The bull lifted an eyelid and saw the little frog hopping up across a branch which hung directly above the basket with a long green rope in his mouth. Down the rope dropped and by its own momentum tied itself to the bucket's handle. The little frog hopped down the tree, grabbed hold of the other end of the rope and proceeded to loop it around a large boulder that was teetering over the bank of a river. With all his little might the frog nudged the boulder moving it the slightest of millimeters but just enough to fall over the bank of the river and splash down below before being carried away by the river. The bundle of rope chased the boulder down the river till it was taught and threw the bucket of apples into the sky.

As green apples rained down from the heavens the little frog gave a stern look to the giant bull, inflated its gullet, and let out a thundering 'riiibbiitt'.

Plumes of smoke escaped from the bull's nostrils, entrenched in fury as the bull charged at the frog."

With that Kwame had paused and began walking away. A boy sitting next to Joseph at the time burst forth "Well what happened next?" to which Kwame replied "The only thing that could" and kept walking.

Chapter 12

There are, after all, only three fold fazes of existence.

Those aspects we keep hidden,

the image we work to portray to the world,

and somewhere in the middle,

that which we are.

Time began to pass swiftly as Joseph acclimatized himself to the place, worked at perfecting his chores, and grew his circle of acquaintances, until a day unlike the others came. It was the first occasion of many in which he would be invited to spend time in the

home of a member of this little community of neighbors. At first he accepted, but when he learned that he would also have to spend the night in their home he became hesitant, not at the thought of awkward moments inevitably arising but simply at the amount of time he would have to spend with strangers. Nonetheless, he took solace in the fact that it would be an excellent opportunity to continue practicing the language he had only just begun studying and that it would give him the chance to widen his feet in this place where he was still unknown to so many.

The day began with a knock at the door that sprung him out of bed. Opening the door he saw the kind face of the soft woman who had extended the invitation the day before last. Joseph tried politely to convey to her that he would need a few moments to prepare himself but she was obstinate and her will to move quickly overcame his to take a few more minutes to gather himself.

So off he went, hand in hand with this old woman who kept up a furious pace. Joseph still had on the shorts and shirt he had been wearing the night before and had not even the time to put on his shoes. His feet were still far more delicate and tender than those of the locals and so he stepped along on the balls of his feet while being pulled by his soon to be hostess.

Upon arrival it became clear that his arrival had indeed caused a stir, a series of individuals came forward to greet him and he for his part was just doing all that he could to act cordial, though he was always more tired than he was letting on. Almost immediately the men and the women broke off from one another as the women gathered in the kitchen area and the men prepared themselves for a journey. Before Joseph could make much sense of what was going on he had been led out the door by a man named

Attiti. The men marched in silence along a trail in the forest. The sole's of Joseph's feet were enduring the worst of the ordeal but still he did his best to show strength. There was great valor in the men he was with, they marched with purpose, all the while not saying even a single word. Attiti was at the head, the very image of the valiant tribal warrior, focused eyes that never faltered, borne head of steed ensuring security for all those he cloaked.

Finally, much to Joseph's delight, they came to a halt at the bank of a small clear pond. In sequence they stripped themselves of all clothing and jumped head first into the waters below. Joseph was tentative but soon followed suit and plunged, naked as the day, into the water. They swam briskly to the other side, one by one lifting themselves up onto the opposite embankment and heading straight towards a towering Montezuma Cypress. The base of its trunk had sprouted copious amounts of a large gooey fungus. Each man in succession ripped out a handful and dived back into the waters behind them to begin lathering themselves in whatever it was that oozed out of this strange mushroom. Joseph was the last to arrive and was again not without shock at the actions of his fellow men, but a stern look from Attiti was all he needed to follow suit.

When they returned to the house, cleansed and refreshed, Joseph saw that the women had been vigorously preparing a grand meal. Through a crack in the door leading into the kitchen Joseph could see the grandmother, his host, bent over, her ass crack showing, pruning some sort of vegetable. The grandfather, sitting on the floor with all the other men around a long rectangular table motioned to Joseph that he should sit down across from him. They sat in silence with their heads slightly bent while the noises of the women bustling about, chatting and laughing resonated all around.

The silence was at long last broken when the food was put in place as all began to eat and drink merrily. The meal was a selection of meats and vegetables. Joseph sat confused for a moment as he could not locate a utensil of any sort but soon understood how to conduct himself. Picking up a leaf he placed on it some part of a pig along with a few stringy vegetables, closed the leaf, dipped it in a thick red sauce and shoved it into his mouth.

Hours later after all the dishes had cleared and the alcohol fueled all those old enough to consume it, Joseph became aware of the awkward position he had been left in. No one really to talk with, his hosts had long since stopped trying to speak what few English words they knew and had plunged themselves into prolonged arguments about the rice. In the corner he saw a teenage boy clipping his grandmother's toenails, the rest of the children frolicked unabated in the adjoining room.

Before long everyone's spirits came back down as all began preparing themselves for sleep. Lying on the heated wooden floor with his head on a pillow Joseph thought for the first time about what his mother might be doing at that moment. Sleep came to him very late that night.

In the morning a solemn remembrance was held and a milky boiled paste was served. Smells of burning onion filled the home as some of the men wept and the women stood firm and resolute. Joseph found himself in the company of the children who sat on the floor picking at their freshly sprouted leg hairs.

When the ceremony was finished preparations began being made for Joseph's first hunt, an occasion all men in the village seemed to be looking forward to. How would this clumsy, brooding, white man handle the wild, the real wild, where man first asserted his

dominance over the other creatures of nature and learned himself to be greater than all the rest. Joseph would take the occasion to write again.

I watched the men scurry around preparing all that we would need. I had told myself that this being my first day I would simply watch and study how the trade was done. However I sensed early on that my company in this endeavor had contrary notions in mind and motioned me along through the packing process as to what I should need for the day, how I should dress myself, and the way in which to clean and ready the gun. Though much of it was left to my own devices to figure out, thus I stumbled and bumbled through much of this first day.

Thankfully Kwame had joined us and he walked beside me on the march to the plane doing his best to prepare me for what was to come. Still stepping awkwardly with the language I was often confused but Kwame always took the time and added all means of body language necessary to explain things thoroughly. "Always keep low", "Always check your rear", "Only shoot when you have a clean site", "Never move quickly", "Have extra bullets at the ready". I had fired a gun before, but it was always at a range or in a secure environment where seemingly nothing could go wrong. Here I had to brace myself for the possibility of everything going wrong and understand what I should do in any number of given situations.

The sun was just peaking over the horizon as we reached a cliff-top overlooking a deep plain. Before us stretched out as far as I could see were patches of shrubbery, ponds, rivers, and trees scattered here and there. From this distance I could clearly see how much movement and activity was alive on the plains as everywhere I looked something

seemed to be moving. I was told firmly that we were only here for Hyena, and that even though there were plenty of other games to be had, Hyena was all that we were interested in. "Be wary of elephants and the hippos" I was told, "the cats will stay away, the elephant and hippos wont". The mangy dog is apparently not the easiest thing to kill, eight was our goal.

We climbed down the hill, already my equipment, boots and gun were feeling heavy. It made me nervous that the hunt had not yet started and already I was beginning to feel drained. The climb down the escarpment was tough, and much help was needed to get me down as quickly as possible. I made certain not to make any moves of my own, I always watched the others. I kept my eyes trained on Attiti for much of the time that powerful yet agile man with piercing eyes. It was he who recorded our first kill, stunting gracefully across the plain like a rabid bull, he broke from our pack, darted behind a tree where only his muzzle end could be seen sticking out the other side of the bark, then a bang, a recoil, and plume of smoke and a scattering of birds. Thirty feet away the first Hyena was stumbling to its death. Many more would die, the site of death I had not properly prepared myself for…

"….to see a Hyena shot at close range. There was a comic slap of the bullet and the hyena's agitated surprise to find death inside of him. It was funnier to see a hyena shot at a great distance, in the heat simmer of the plain, to see him go over backwards, too see him start that frantic circle, to see that electric speed that meant he was racing the little nickeled death inside him…(there was another type)…the pinnacle of Hyena humour, was the hyena, the classic hyena, that hit too far back while running, would

circle madly, snapping and tearing at himself until he pushed his own intestines out, and then stood there, jerking them out and eating them with relish."[13]

Within a few hours we had all that we needed and began making our way back home. I was congratulated with a series of rigorous pats to the back, I think they were just grateful that I didn't slow them down too much. I didn't even fire my gun that first day, but I knew there would be many more opportunities to come.

[13] Earnest Hemmingway, Green Hills of Africa. Scribner, 2003, Pg. 37-38

Chapter 13

A thousand and one forces conspire to lead us

Along paths tracked only by the hands of time

On odd days when Joseph did not have any duties to attend to he would meander about the garden in an attempt to get himself better acquainted with it. He was deeply intrigued by the seemingly infinite number of pathways that formed an intricate web of interconnected trails. Each began at a seemingly random spot in the forest line and from there spread out in all directions, over hills, around mountains, down valleys, and across streams. Some were clearly designed by men, others unconsciously sculpted over time by animal and man alike. Some had a destination, most went nowhere.

On one such day Joseph chose for himself one of these paths and made a point of seeing where it would take him. He walked down steep slopes, up green pastures, through thick foliage and around simmering hot springs until he arrived at an outcropping on a cliff overlooking a stream. Drenched in sweat he sat down with his legs stretched out in front of him, his shirt wrung around his forehead and his hands flat on the ground behind him as he peered out into the scene that unfurled before him. Beautiful though it was, he became drowsy rather quickly and was slowly drifting off to sleep when suddenly, out of the forest, down by the shrubberies near the river below stumbled a group of children. His vantage point of them was fairly conspicuous and so he decided to sit and watch, unabated by the thought of being discovered.

There were six of them in all, four girls and two boys. Their dark complexion fit in rather seamlessly with the environment around them. They were delicately cloaked by the mist of a waterfall just to their right which gave them a mystic quality and he used it to help build the fanciful characters of each that he wove in his mind. The first girl to burst through the thicket was a loud, obnoxious, skinny little girl who raced to the rivers edge to play with whatever it was she could find. She was cute, though not strikingly so, and looked out into the world with eyes wide open and her head on a swivel. Next came an odd looking girl, her skin was slightly darker than the rest, she was bigger in stature and walked with a clumsy sort of gallantry. She was as naïve as could be, slightly older than the others though not completely up to par in her mental faculties. She would walk around and stare at things with a perplexed look on her face before moving on to the next shiny object.

There was a slight pause in entrances as the first two girls seemed to be moving slightly ahead of the rest of the pack before two boys came out almost simultaneously. The boy to the right was short and fat, adorned in unbecoming clothing that a parent who cared not for the appearance of their child must have picked out. The other boy was slim and tidy with parted hair and glasses. The two of them were entranced in a world of imagination, playing out their own fantasies unaware of the real world around them. The skinny boy seemed to be the brains of the operation and the storehouse of the most wondrous of ideas between the two of them. He would set the scenarios and watch as his fat stupid friend went along with whatever was said.

Next to emerge from the wood was a tiny little angel. She seemed to float out of the trees, her angelic face was round and plump, her big eyes and long eyelashes took in all that the world had to offer. She was inquisitive but not annoyingly so as the first girl was, sweet but not ghastly, friendly, but not overbearing. She was everything that a little girl her age should be. With short steps she came to the waters edge and sat herself down. Staring at the bumbling brook in front of her she caught sight of a flower just to her left and gently petted it, making sure not to disturb its fragile existence.

Then stumbled out of the woods an ogre, she was the biggest of the bunch, a ghastly sight with a wide belly and thick thighs, she seemed unable to communicate in an even voice as every word that sputtered forward came out as a bark coated in a shrill and vile accent. Her presence completely disturbed the surreal scene that had been laid out before her arrival. She pushed aside the tall skinny girl as she made her way to the river, violently sticking her hand in and splashing anyone in range, chuckling to herself as she did so.

Something would soon be discovered that would divert all of their attention. A dead blowfish would be found washed up on banks of the river a few yards down. Its eyes protruding from its head, a flabby sack of flesh mounted on its side, little white spikes covered in sand over skin that had lost nearly all its color, and a plunging hole running through the middle of its body. Despite the grotesqueness of the site, it was easy to see why it would draw the attention of such a young group of comrades.

The quiet, angelic girl had been the first to spot it. She stared at it for a few moments, not alerting anyone else of its presence and soon turned away, finding it too unpleasant to look at for long. It was not until the loud ogre spotted it that the rest of the children were made aware of its existence. At once they ran towards it, its not every day a dead blowfish washes up. The littlest girl continued to say nothing and merely hovered around the others staring at the sand as they inspected the find.

Quickly the ogre got it in her to lift and hurl the thing into the air with a stick, so off she trotted into the forest. The two boys were busy trying to push each other into it or daring the other to touch the awful looking thing. The second youngest, and second cutest, of the girls got right down to its level and looked it straight in the eye while the little angel continued to walk around the others staring at the ground.

“Thumpty, thump” came the sound of the ogre trotting back from the forest with a big stick and proceeded to poke and prod the dead blowfish. The others let out cries of disgust with every poke, yet unable to turn their gaze. The ugly girl continued in the same manner for some time, piercing the skin here and there, chuckling all along as ooze and blood slowly began to drip from the body of the blowfish. Finally she stabbed it through, lifted it up in the air, and attempted to fling it at one of the boys, but as she did so the

momentum produced by the weight of the blowfish at the end of the stick had carried her too far and she slipped and fell on the ground, nearly falling into the river. An uproar of laughter soon followed from the other children, even the little one couldn't help but chuckle at such a ghastly site. But the laughter quickly faded as the scorned girl looked at her compatriots and engulfed herself in rage. She was flung into a wild tantrum that the others knew all too well as they ran away while the beast tried desperately to catch any one of them and assert her revenge. Off the group went, back into the forest, and out of the Joseph's sight.

He sat back and while thinking away, began, for the first time in all of his days here, to comprehend how completely entranced he was becoming by the garden. He felt that a profound change had come over him but could not sense where it was taking him in. He realized how much joy he was getting out of his simple walks too and from work each odd day. It was an exuberance for life that had blossomed in all directions. It came from the fields of rice that he passed where he could see the little stalks inching themselves day by day closer to the sun…only to inevitably be ripped away every few months and forced to start all over again. It grew from gazing out into herds of Alpaca and seeing a little one following diligently in the footsteps of their mother…only to know that one day she too would have little daughters of her own to lead around. It was seen while observing a Peregrine Falcon swoop down from out of the sky to snatch a baby Tasmanian Wombat…only to have the little thing squirm out of its talons and back into the warm embrace of its mother. It was felt in a horde of Army Ants working in brilliant unison to carry a fallen banana back to their home…only to have a big dumb Castillian Boar effortlessly rip it away. It had flowered while gazing at an Irish Moiled Calf licking

itself under the shade of a Spruce tree…only to have a pair of African Lioness leap out from behind the bushes and forever end its siesta. It was a deep awe that had grown in him, of a world he once knew nothing of, yet he was finding beauty in it more pure than anything he had ever known.

Later that day rain came, a tumultuous downpour ripe with anthropomorphic qualities. No work could be done as everyone was forced to spend their time indoors listening to the pattering of liquid that engulfed the garden. A cavalcade of bosporus calamities wrought life's growing splendor that would eventually leave behind a scattering of uneven pools, flooded embankments, and messy fields of rice.

Joseph did what he could to keep himself entertained but his abode was bade, containing nothing that could properly stimulate himself in the time he had to spend. So he treated himself to nature's delights by sitting by the window and looking out into a world filled with wet dreams. The sky could no longer be seen and had been substituted by a blanket of rain. It came and came with no end in sight. An infinitude of apple sized rain drops were exploding everywhere, sparing nothing. The ground had become saturated, the trees did what they could to avoid the worst of the onslaught but were no match for natures bombastic device. All were subject on this day, no shrub, goat, plant, cow, tree, or man could compete.

When boredom once again set in, Joseph concocted a dramatic turn of events, stripping himself to his underwear he stepped foot outside his house and took off running into the distance. With his head down and his body focused on his feet he drove forward, splashing over the ground like a wild bull he bore himself up to the plateau, across a

clearing, and around a bend in the forest line before finally stopping in a wide plain. His chest pounding, his legs throbbing, he fell back and took it all in.

Chapter 14

Realism is not an absolute truth

It is but a perspective

Another day of leisure presented itself and Joseph was determined to make his way to a collection of natural pools that lay in the distance which he had heard much about. The only stumbling block was that they required a rather perilous climb before they could be reached but a few young volunteers quickly stepped forward to guide their intrepid traveler through his wanderings.

The appropriate path was soon found and off they went. Through the jungle they trekked for hours before arriving at the foot of a mountain where a staircase had been carved. Up and up and up it stretched, hand over feet, past slippery slopes, fallen trees and jagged rock. For an hour they did nothing but climb, no talking, no eye contact, just

climbing, Josephs legs had burned by the tenth minute, by the fortieth he had been ready to collapse before he felt a hand on his back pushing him foreword. Sweat dripped as it never had before, mosquitoes pestered every step and the heat was never ending.

Finally they reached the summit where a platform had been erected, Joseph choked on the thin air. Sweat quickly pooled beneath him as he peered over the edge and down into the valley. Pink and yellow limestone cliffs rose sharply on either side revealing at their base luminescent pools of green water with a gushing waterfall at its head. The flowing water from the forest above had bottlenecked and carved a hole down by the apex of this wedge where the water gushed forth. Flocks of Great Red Hawks hung in the medium. Despite the fact that the others had seen it many times before they too stood motionless at the sight of it, eyes wide, no one acknowledging anyone else's presence, everyone basking in nature's glow.

Forty or so minutes had passed, Joseph was still sweating but his breathing had regulated and the others believed him to be ready to make the climb down the opposite side of the ascent. Onward they crawled, and despite an ease in physical strain that came with working alongside gravity, the ever present danger made the path down much more strenuous for the slightest slip would send any among them tumbling down the unforgiving slope. As a result the descent proved much slower than the climb up as everyone in the group took made themselves sure of each step taken. Even the most adventurous of the group took no risks with their footing as Joseph saw them carefully planning where each foot would be placed. The slow, deliberate motions of the others bound fear to Joseph's heart.

It was long and arduous but eventually they made it to the bottom, hiked another half kilometer or so through swampy grass lands and emerged through the forest to find themselves at the bottom of the great canvas that they had just seen from above. The first of the now crystal clear pools stood directly in front of them, the sun had just broken through the clouds and shone with great splendor into the water. New colors emerged, vibrant greens and blues sprung forth but still the water retained its transparency to reveal the limestone bed underneath which gave it its shape. Each pool trickled down into the next one just below it. Up above, where the two tall walls of rock that enclosed the sight met, was a raging waterfall that looked to have been standing there, ripping apart the earth, for millennia. Its fury was never-ending; anything that might have found itself unlucky enough to be caught in its tentacles would never emerge. Over time the plunging of water had cut into the pliable earth, yet unable to hack away at the limestone rocks that protected the pools it dug its way into the ground creating a raging tunnel of flowing water, leaving the pools floating above still and tranquil.

Sweating from every inch, Joseph quickly tore of everything he had been wearing and plunged himself head first into the first of these great reservoirs. A moment of complete catharsis came over him, the first he had ever had. Joseph would always remember the sensations he felt in those first few seconds under the cool water. For the first time in his life any and all anxiety he may have had left him. He could feel nothing. Complete tranquility.

Joseph and the rest of the boys spent the remainder of the day in this place, relaxing in the pools, eating fresh mangoes off the trees and staring longingly at the hawks above.

When he returned to life in the village he saw the first steps in the preparation of a festival had begun. For days the people in the village were in a buzz, celebrations were afoot as another harvest season was ending. Food was being brought together from every corner of the garden and all were ready to rejoice.

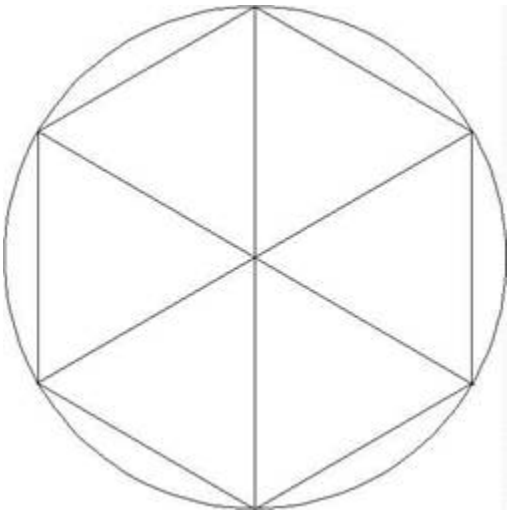
When they gathered for the meal Joseph's attention was drawn to a boy, a cuddly little thing with chubby cheeks and little lips whose eyes unceasingly darted around the room until before him was placed a dish of fried kambler dough. His face lit up as he stared into the full plate of scrumptious delights. His eyes then floated over to his mother sitting four seats down across the table, he scanned her face for approval, she, playing her part, met his gaze and hesitated, waiting until his little heart had calmed down a little, when she could not restrain her child's happiness any longer she motioned to the boy that it was okay for him to eat from the plate in front of him.

The instant the boy got the approval he began to thoroughly examine the baked goods piled high before him, intensely cowering for the best, the most delicious piece. At times end he selected the piece that best met his scrupulous appetite, snatched it from the pile and shoved it into his mouth, taking in the entire thing in with one all encompassing bite. Every motion of his mouth filled him with delight, his eyes clenched together and his cheeks puffed out as he fought to keep every piece inside. His bites were slow but persistent. Nothing else in the world could distract the child at the moment, a meteor could come crashing down and still he would know nothing but content. When the experience was over, he opened his eyes, picked out another treat and began the journey again and again until he was completely satiated.

At the other end of the table a mother was spoon feeding her baby, an infant no more than two or three years of age. Again Joseph absconded himself from his surroundings to observe the happenstances of this child and her mother. Systematically the old woman would dip her spoon into a bowl full of pourage, bring the spoon up through the bowl, scraping its covering so as to make a smooth, level surface. She would then blow on it three times before bringing it to the child's mouth. The boy would open as wide as he could and let out a pervasive 'ahhhh' as the spoon entered his mouth. He closed his lips and spent the next moments obsequiously munching on that which had gone inside. The mother would then meticulously wipe the child's mouth and ready the next spoonful.

When the boy seemed content the young mother placed the spoon back into the bowl and gently push the serving away. She propped the infant up onto her thighs to gaze into her babies face. A smile broke forth as Joseph saw her imagining the life the child would one day have. The day he would go into the fields himself to sow the harvest, the day he would take to study of his own accord, the day he fell in love, his entire ascent to manhood burst forth in her smile. The child for his part paid almost no attention to his mother's gazing, happy instead to stare impassively at the old man across from him who was lecturing a small audience of eager young onlookers about the reasoning for the passing of the winds.

As evening fell a game of football was arranged and all the kids took part. A swarm of little legs followed an orange and blue ball wherever it went. Catching his breath Joseph veered over to the sidelines to take a moments rest. When he did so he saw, etched into the sand of the playground the following diagram..



appositus infinitio

As Joseph spent some moments intently peering at it, vexed by it, the soccer ball bounced its way over, a second later the swarm of boys had engulfed the surrounding area, kicking dust in every direction. When the ball had gone back into play and the kids had followed and all the dust had settled Joseph peered again at what he had seen only to find that it had vanished forever, as if it never existed.

Many the wonders but nothing walks stranger than man.
This thing crosses the sea in winter's storm,
Making his path through roaring waves.
And she, the greatest of gods, the Earth-
Age she is, and unwearied-he wears her away
As the ploughs go up and down from year to year

And his mules turn up the soil

Gay nations of birds he snares and leads,

Wild beast tribes and the salty brood of the sea,

With the twisted mesh of his nets, this clever man.

He controls with craft the bests of the open air,

Walkers on hills. The horse with his shaggy mane

He holds and harnesses, yoked about the neck,

And the strong bull of the mountain.

Language, and though like the wind

And the feelings that make the town,

He has taught himself shelter against the cold,

Refuge from the rain. He can always help himself.

He faces no future helpless. There's only death

That he cannot find an escape from. He has contrived

Refuges from illnesses once beyond cure.

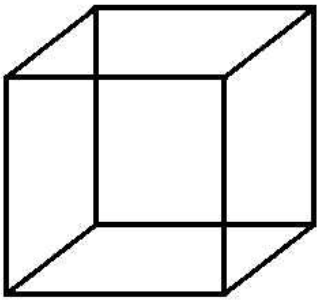
Clever beyond all dreams

And the inventive craft that he has

Which may drive one time or another to well or ill[14]

[14] Sophocles, Antigone

Chapter 15



As Joseph was on his way home from a long day of work, the child with the big puffy cheeks and adjourned face came running over to walk beside him.

“Joseph, My name is Micah, nice to meet you.” Looking down into his face as he kept walking Joseph managed to piece together what the little boy was trying to say, content in himself that he was beginning to come to grips with the language.

“Its nice to meet you too.” Joseph said as cordially as he could though the day had been long and hard and he wanted nothing more than to get home, wash up, eat and drift into oblivion.

“Where do you come from?” the boy continued.

“A very far off place.” Joseph said as frankly as he could, the boy, being a boy, did not sense Joseph’s irritation in regard to these questions and proceeded to drill him.

“Where have you been?”

“Many a place” said Joseph in a language meant to confuse and dissuade the boy from continuing his line of questioning.

“What is the rest of the world like?”

To this question Joseph stopped walking, he sensed that the boy would persist no matter what action Joseph took and looking at his chubby little cheeks Joseph saw the sincerity and inquisitiveness in the darting little eyes and decided to entertain him for a few moments.

“There are big places, small places, wondrous places, strange places, scary places, and any other kind of place that you can imagine” Joseph for his part had not had a lot of experience when it came to engaging with young minds and didn’t know exactly how to go about it, though he was observant enough to see that the boy was unable to grasp his aphoristic style and thought to change his tone.

“There are some places with buildings sooooo big that they soar above the trees. Others where thousands of people gather together in small bunched up places. Each are wonderful, but I promise you that none are as amazing as this place.”

“What’s the biggest building you ever saw?”

“Do you know that really big tree next to your grandpa’s house?”

“ya”

“bigger”

“how much bigger”

“This much” as Joseph stretched his hand to the sky

“wow” but before the boy could continue with another question something else caught his eye in the distance and he immediately ran off after it yelling goodbye as he did so. Joseph stood for a moment, perplexed at what had just happened, but continued walking home.

It wouldn’t take many more such encounters for Joseph and Micah to spark an odd friendship as they often found themselves to be in each others company, Micah with his grandiose questions, Joseph armed with a breadth of discouraging or helpful remarks depending on how his mood struck him that day.

A day came when Joseph would be the first of the two to engage in thought and began by asking a series of pointed questions.

“What did you do today?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean nothing?”

“Well I went to school, but that’s it.”

“What did you do in school?”

“Class today was out in the field, teacher made us climb to the top of a biiiiig hill and sit in a circle. Then he made us all turn around and look at everything around us.”

“What did you see?”

“Nothing, just some trees and animals and rocks and stuff.”

“What did you do next.”

“Then teacher told us to count all the pieces of grass that we saw, I got to 200!”

“Wow, was that the highest?”

“YUP!”

“What did you do next?”

“Next teacher made us lie down and try to count all the pieces of grass again, but with our eyes closed.”

“Could you do it?”

“Kinda.”

The boy squinted in vain, trying to repeat the experiment and give Joseph a visual representation of the picture he was painting.

“Were always doing stuff like that, teachers kinda weird sometimes.”

“What are your favorite classes?”

“Math”

“Why?”

“Its easier.”

“How long are you gonna be in school for?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you want to do after?”

“I don’t know”

From then on Joseph decided it would be much more stimulating for the both of them if he allowed Micah to ask the questions.

The next meeting came the very next day as Joseph saw him early in the morning meandering about a rice field. As soon as the boy caught sight of Joseph he ran in his direction shouting his name.

“How are you today?”

“Pretty good.”

“Where are you going?”

“Up to the library.”

“Why?”

“Because I have not been there yet.”

“Pfff, that’s boring, come I’ll show you something better.”

Micah grabbed his hand and lead him towards the opening of another of the great many paths that shivered their way through the garden.

“Where are we going?”

“To play with the Elephants.”

“What?”

“It’s fun, last week Jaeda got on a baby one for like 20 minutes.”

“Uh, are you sure this is a good idea.”

“Ya its fine we do it all the time.”

“There’s never been a problem?”

“Never…uhmmm….ya, never.”

“How many elephants are there?”

“Twenty Four!”

“What other animals do you play with?”

"Uhmmm….Sometimes the Giraffe but they're not fun."

"How many of them are there?"

"Sixteen I think"

"Are you sure there's never been a problem?"

"Probably, wait, uh oh, I have to go home, sorry."

And just like that the little boy darted off back up the path to where they had come from. Joseph was left at the beginnings of a strange new pathway and found it too enticing not to pursue. And so he went off, over a steep slope and down into a valley from which the biggest ravine flowed, plunging itself deep into the heart of the forest. However, much to his dismay, the path had soon cut off and so he stopped to sit under a tree and gather his thoughts. He turned his head to the right and watched the babbling brook flowing over the rocks. He tried to follow particles of water, an atom, a quark, a neutrino, whatever it may be, as it made its journey around the bend and into Joseph's field of vision. From there it would descend rapidly down the slope of the foothills, around sticks and stones, under fallen leaves, through the pebbles at the rivers bed, and bump and bounce against the walls before slowing down right in front of Joseph. The fallen twigs had created a damn which funneled water along an opening along the far bank of the river; from there the little molecule would continue on its journey down the river and through the entirety garden.

Joseph thought that a poet picturing the same journey might take the liberty of describing that particles time in the garden as the greatest moment of its life. That never again would it find itself in a place so beautiful, the rest of its existence would not need experiencing now that it had been, ever so briefly, in the most beautiful of all places. That

even though it would never be back, through its time spent here, its life had spawned meaning and purpose. At this point Joseph gave his made up author a satirical tone as he thought of him giving this tiny insignificant speck of H^20 a personality, a name and a distinguished shape. For the rest of its life it would boast to all of its friends, family members and passer bys about the time that it had spent in this place. Somewhere down the road in its life, maybe on another one of those dreadfully long journeys through the Caspian Sea, it would meet another speck of particular beauty that had also once found itself in this place a long time ago. They would reminisce about the experience for ages, fall in love and never part from each other. The star-crossed lovers would hold their nose's up to all others that they met knowing that they had once lived in the greatest of all places. Over time a modest and dignified air would come over them, when another would mention its own epic journey along the Nile, or down Victoria falls, or through the Tigris, they would remain modest and conserved and not mention their own epic tale. They would look upon each other with love unbuttered and never say a word. The poet inside the author would then pick up the story again and leave the reader chiding with the words,

And thus the garden bettered them
Made them an exquisite part of our realm
Cast them up the ladder, to sovereignty's helm.

While immersed in thought Joesph had unconsciously placed his hand down on the ground behind him to aid his balance, when he did so he felt something strange, it was

not earth as he had expected, but something with an entirely different texture, his sense of touch alerted his reason and he looked down to find a leather bound corner of something sticking up from under the dirt. He quickly began digging and wiping the dirt away and found that buried beneath was a book. He un-rooted it carefully, blowing dirt from its cover, it was bound with a cows skin and a piece of twine, unraveling the piece of twine he held it by the spine and shook gently allowing the dirt from all of the pages inside to come loose. Slowly he opened it and sifted through it scanning the pages and words for clues as to what it might be about or who could have written it. From first glances it appeared what lay in his hands was a collection of thoughts, short stories merged with scribbled notation, most of which seemed never to have been finished. He flipped between random pages reading sentences at a time before deciding to turn to the first page and start reading the first blurb….

A pair of Genoese brothers gave light to discovery. Vadina and Ugolino Vivaldi set sail with the hope of rounding all that is Africa. Never to be heard from again.

What happened to these two men might be the most endearing fantasy in human history. Certainly the most inspiring I have ever read. Just imagine.

Pastor John perhaps?

Flipping to the next page he found a scrap of a letter nearly burnt through. Its words were hazy and the message nearly unreadable but after some straining Joseph managed to unravel it.

A poem lost

Pastor John where did you go

To a far off land no one knows

To raise the herds and graze the cattle

Or to smite the devil in fearsome battle

The people of home long for your news

We poor and feeble embolden the brews

I had but with me a hundred men

Each ready to serve in your hen

I wish to see you with my own eyes,

To know you live and are not a disguise

I'll bleed and rummage across the savannah

And sweat to the brim to don your embrace

Carefully setting the letter back in place Joseph flipped to the next page where a different ink had begun to be used…

***T*oday I imagined myself in this place living thousands of years ago side by side with Cro-Magnon man as humanity was first beginning to assert its dominance over the earth. Wars would be fought, though not with each other, for**

our foes were not our own. After each battle we would get smarter, learn. Our opponents were always bigger or stronger or faster or just more adept to the wild. We of course had the one thing that they did not, the ability to learn from every encounter how to better approach the same situation next time, and most importantly, to vividly remember. Like Spartan warriors we would take on every battle with overwhelming ferocity as the bravest and strongest among us hurled themselves into death.

My stories carried on in different streams, at times I would be a Spanish Conquistador arriving on foreign lands and enslaving entire nations with only a small band of loyal and proud men. Or better yet, to be a Charlie Savage and single handedly capture whole islands with nothing but my wits and a couple guns.

The next scrap of paper barely held on to its bindings….

The Greeks gave us our minds, our powers of logic, comprehension and the idea of freedom, ideas that permeate throughout the structures of our societies.

The Romans gave us something much more concrete, though in no way more valuable. Their intricate system of laws, regulations and a belief in rigid nationalism spread to all western societies that would follow.

Plato banned poets as a direct attack on Homer? Was his vanity so large as to not have any room in his world for the father of all literature? For to write is to struggle against another, at least that is what the greatest of writing has been, yet we all are doomed to wander in Shakespeare's shadow.

Some say Plato lost the battle, after all, every Greek boy knew the tales of Homer while Plato, in all his vainglory was confined to the realm of the aristocracy, where all great works go to die.

The soul of thought lives with the plebeians, the patricians know nothing of suffering, they have not experienced real life and should never be asked to think critically about it.

It was after reading this third passage that Joseph paused for a moment and realized that he needed to relieve himself and that he was hungry. He walked to the edge of the river and pissed into the wind to see his manmade ravine splash against the river and hide itself within. Next he went into the forest to find food and not far from where he was found some berries and an apple tree. Scavenging through them he picked out the ripest and devoured them as quickly as he could before sitting down again, tucking one leg under the other and placing the book on his calves to continue this aphoristic embrace….

Funny, the crusades killed thousands, but it was only through it that Europeans learned how to cultivate and process sugar from their Muslim rivals.

To learn from your enemy is the greatest indicator we have that our lives are best spent living and learning together rather than fighting and killing apart.

Too bad such will never be.

Etched into the bottom of that same page…

We must admire prose for its athleticism, yet never forget poetry's grace.

Along with…

Odd no? That many of the greatest of literary characters that man's mind has envisioned earned their place in the annals of greatness through their ability to deceive and manipulate those around them. To add, all did so for the purpose of fulfilling evil whims. Nonetheless, it is them whome we most admire. Faust, Peisistratus, Don Juan, Prometheus, Falstaff…..

On the next page…

Again there arose in the maleficent expose of creation a sense of impropriety among the effected individuals. Their non-complacence and disenfranchised youth had given rise to the most malicious of dreams. Dreams cordial yet magnanimous with an aggrandizement of scope so profound and assiduous that the very enchantment of them drew many a man wild. Had the prefectures of such elements intended for their outcome to be so destructive then perhaps the record would not be quite so nefarious. However, due to the benign guidance of perfected ill notions, the conclusion becomes nothing else than resolutely ubiquitous.

two great levels of despair.

The lesser being the realization that one has not lived up to one's potential. And the greater one, the one we are most to fear for it brings about the greatest amount of pathos, the terrifying realization that one has achieved all that he possibly can.

The defenders of fiction would say that fiction gives us an insight into who we are that non-fiction never could. I believe it to be nothing more than an exercise for the mind and as much as it may reveal about our characters, personalities, or conceited opinions, its purpose is best served when we see it as a means not by which we better ourselves but only in so far as it makes those idle moments of our lives fill with colour. Without it our lives, our species, would be boring. And nothing is worse than being boring.

All the while as Joseph was reading his mind moved in and out of the topic of who it might have been that could have written this work. He searched again for an author or a clue of any kind that could give him some answers to his questions of where, when and who. No answers were to be found and he would have to make up his own story concerning the origin of this book. He pictured a man living a long time ago in this place when the garden was still in its infancy. The man was old and had a great beard. He would sit by this river for days at a time and scribble away on the pieces of paper that he brought with. The collection that Joseph possessed was just a sample of the body of work that he had written, stories that never had the legs to carry themselves into the mainstream and whose tales never reached any vernacular. The man probably died here, maybe his bones are somewhere around.

Joseph then altered his history and chose instead to place him at a time before the creation of the garden, but he still died he here, this time while writing the last of these works with his pen in his hand and his notebook on his lap. All that was to remain of who he was is in this book.

And with the image of the dead scribe lingering he continued to read…

An attempt to establish what constitutes the greatest of activities man may choose for himself….

Philosophy - Lovers of wisdom come together and embrace your role as the greatest of all men who have lived. It was you that first thought of all those things that we now call politics, philology, jurisprudence, theology, why even the math's and the sciences owe their beginnings to men of philosophy. How can any thing else but the primordial be the greatest of all subjects?

Physics – It governs us all. Not just humanity but every conceivable thing in nature has no choice but to abide by its rules. We are forced to live within its domain. To study it is to study what constrains us, what the limits of our world are. How could anything else possibly have more bearing on our lives than the very thing that binds what it, we, and everything we know are capable of?

Language – It must be at the fore, for how else would we be able to express our ideas about anything if not for it. Without it we would be truly lost, doomed to live like the mollusk, never progressing, never understanding, never being able to build upon anything worthy of being called greatness. Nothing else could be more worthy of study than the very subject that allows us to study anything in the first place.

Law – Jurisprudence entailed must be the most important of all disciplines. Without its invention we would never have progressed beyond living in a state of nature. It gave order, hence form, to our societies, allowed us to live together without falling apart. must then not be the predominant discipline?

Biology – What are we if not the cells that constitute us? An understanding of our basic form gives us answers to questions we once thought incapable of understanding. Its study has enabled us to live longer and better lives, hence allowing us more time to divulge ourselves in all other matters we deem important. Is not this field of study then supreme in all matters?

Economics – Our association with money and the accumulation of resources seems as naturally a-priori as anything else in life. For no other cause do as many people devote as much time to than economic stability. Countless numbers live their lives solely in the hope of attaining more money or more possessions, which are effectively equal. By this deduction, must it then not constitute the supreme of all studies?

Farming – To the practice of agriculture nothing else can compare. It provides the sustenance of life. Without it we would still be roaming around barren landscapes scrounging for shrubs. It gave us roots, planted us in the earth and allowed us to cultivate ourselves. Everything we now know owes its existence to this most ancient of practices. How then could anything else possibly take precedence?

Math – The language of nature, its comprehension must stand paramount to all other achievements. The only method of exchange that has no barriers, intelligible to all. Its understanding has propelled us off the earth and given clarity to the structure of the cosmos. God's chains. Our understanding of it is the closest we have come to true enlightenment. Must it not then be the most important of all learnings?

War Craft – War dominates all. No civilization on earth would have become what it did if it did not first conquer this craft. No nation that has ever existed rose to prominence without it. It more than any other separates the rich from the poor. The greatest divider, disperser of resources, adjudicator, arbitrator and judge we have ever known. Could anything else possibly compete?

Housewife – For all of time it has been the occupation of the majority. Anything that any man or woman has ever achieved owes itself to this great and noble practice. It is our foundation for without it we would have nothing to build off, to create from, to keep us from falling. Must those that then practice not be held in esteem higher than all the rest?

Joseph uncurled his legs and lay down with his head on a root and the book upon his chest, flipping over the next page to continue…

A man spent his life in bliss till he fell in love with a woman that did not love him. Suddenly he found himself yearning for the days when he wouldn't see her, those days when her image wouldn't linger for too long and torture his being. It was always on those other days when he found himself bothered by his work, unable to focus for long stretches of time for it never took long for an image, maybe it was those parted plump limps, slender thighs or plump cleavage to flash before him and all focus would dissipate. It haunted him when still, made his work useless, his nights restless and his troubles worsen.

It was once said that to write and pray is to live for the rest of your days. How the adage could be for the man and fungus live a life adjourned. Only carried forth by what seeds they may plant and by what misanthropic advantages they embark upon, or rather find themselves in. Celibacy is man's only sin, one which some are doomed to take and others `choose'.

Life aplenty should never be had in a life of limited resources. One in the same cannot be held by all. Those who suckle at the teats of life and keep all treasures to themselves are the only pestilence that humanity has produced. A bleak life spent in idleness is still better than the life spent in the gathering of all things under the sun.

The prisoner hung his head low and sobbed like a mother looking over her dying baby as he tortured himself with thoughts of how had he come to be in this state. Not long before his life had been easy and without disturbance. Now a black shroud had been cast before him and all the world around him had turned dark with sundry.

The iron gates that lead the way to the guard's office slammed shut letting forth a harsh metallic shriek, again the young man sobbed like never before. His throat hurt, his eyes bled, his stomach turned, his nose ran, his arms ached, and his heart burned. All the worst of Lucifer's plagues had dispatched themselves upon him as he sat, without hope, defenseless against the onslaught of emotion that was battering him.

It was several hour before he managed to find himself some relief when he managed to picture himself back on a beach in the pacific, a memory that he seemed to have experienced a lifetime ago but was again coming to his aid in his most perilous of hours. There he was, miles of white sandy beach, and sapphire blue waters amidst an evanescent sky, an image ostensibly undisturbed for all of time. Beside him lay his beauty, clad in a white sarong that perfectly contrasted her olive skin and gave her curves she was already heavy in. Towards the water they galloped and played and lived in nothing but joy before the thunderclouds gathered and the sky went black. Crying

again he dragged himself up, ran head first and smashed his skull into the concrete wall. Not a whimper did he ever again let out.

Skipping through a couple pages Joseph would stop only intermittently to dig out a few more…

Epicurus, the first gardener, Candide's father and the carrier of a virtue which we seek more than any other.

Metempsicosis. A system of delay? Retrograded to fit a dapper demeanor?

A day could be had, long ago, where true freedom reigned. Bound by too many shackles we shuffle along in life seeking freedom but never able to break into a stride. Maybe this will end up being my life's work, humanities quest for freedom, it has defined every action we have ever taken (just as many other things have). Mere survival is no longer our goal, we cast it into the shadows many moons ago, we now must strive for a higher plane. How to achieve it? No one really seems to know. Most believe money is needed, but to live a life in pursuit of money surely can not be the answer.

The most a man can think to do with his life is to think. To blissfully pass oneself into the domain of the

mind must be the most divine of endeavors. It breathes light into the senses and allows sight itself to attain focus.

From Thales to Erasmus the mind has thrived and lived as none other existent being the earth has ever conceived. Its domain is its own, shared with nothing else and capable of more than any before it. (why, it even made god).

Consciousness is even the means by which the Universe becomes familiar with its own existence.

Religion gives to our masses the means by which to find fulfillment. The rest of us should live in envy of those whose lives have been made so easy, we who are doomed to fall back into the lonely pit of solipsism.

Birds of a feather flock together. How true it is, wander around any of the worlds great metropolitans and what you will see is a world split into

segments of humanity. **There is no melting pot.** Little Italy, Chinatown, Somaliland, Jewish neighborhoods, black ghettos, all existing yet none really living in harmony with any other, only within themselves do they find peace. Immigrants emigrate and wind up living in pockets of the place they once lived. Why leave your home at all if all your going to do is try and recreate it in some distant part of the world?

Or maybe that's what it's all about? Our ability to move thousands of miles away but leave nothing behind.

Do all good Christians live their lives in pursuit of moments free from sin?

What they say is right, writing a true sentence, one completely devoid of other people's thoughts and words is the greatest accomplishment a writer could ever hope for.

Flipping to the end Joseph found the final page containing nothing but a few scribbled words on the bottom right hand corner…..

To think oneself a god, what a thrill it must be. Something I'd want to experience but never to live. Empedocles cast himself into

the fires of Mt. Etna to increase his divinity. Caligula fought Neptune, clashing arrows and swords against the wrath of the tide. Oh what joy to be had when one succumbs to the temptations of madness.

With the completion of these last words Joseph closed his eyes and fell asleep by the river.

He awoke after a few hours feeling invigorated and after rummaging through the forest to find some more food took to writing himself. He had his pen with him and chose for lack of option to use some of the blank pages he found in his newly unearthed book. What he wrote became blotted fragments of a mind moving to fast to be jotted down. He was disappointed with himself for it left him capable of producing nothing but idle poetry…

To sin and to let live
Thus seems to be the life we have chosen,
The blessed now stand on the outside looking in
Thought not with envy but bitter shame
They who think we should honor them
Oh what arrogant thymos lies in the narcissistic martyr

Bloody scrapes of wool
Shake our marrow to the bone
The winged Cherubim of angels past

If that J writer could see us now

Laughing and prancing in ignorant's bliss

The true horror, the horror

Two planks of wood run perpendicular through the world

Reveal, reveal your true mask to me

I who seek nothing but truth

Yet long for none of your charms

Just the facts you conceal

Absolum, absolum.

Chapter 16

The honest and chaste woman is the ermine, and the purity of her virtue is whiter and cleaner than snow; the man who wants her not to lose it but to keep and preserve it must treat her in a manner different from the one used with an ermine; he should not place mud before her – I mean the gifts and wooing of importunate lovers.[15]

– Don Quixote

Joseph soon began to become acutely aware of the fact that the garden was consuming him. His thoughts would still wonder from time to time to the world outside of the garden but with less frequency and over larger intervals. He feared that if this pattern were to continue he would forget completely the world that he had come from, a

[15] Cervantes, Don Quixote, edith grossman translation, harper Collins publishers, pg. 280

deduction that soon began to plague him. What happens to a man when he has forgotten who he was? Does memory of where he came from and the person long since past make him the man that he is? How much longer could he spend here? How long had it already been? Will he ever see the places and people he once called home again? These and more began to beat him down and weigh upon him throughout his days in the field.

While Joseph was caught in the midst of sorrow a day of reverie came and all gathered to bask in the affectacious blaze of the night's events. A bonfire was lit; children ran around like cavemen, women gossiped and chattered, men drank, and animals staggered around confused at the spectacle. Joseph tried as best he could to mingle and relieve himself of the quickly mounting questions that were haunting him, however he found no relief in idle talk and could not bring himself to dance. He turned to alcohol in an attempt to allow it to carry him through but found no reprieve in its rapturous embrace. And so he trotted off back to his bed to sulk for another few days.

On the fourth day of his despondency he sought comfort in the garden itself by once again picking out one of the many pathways and seeing where it might take him. After only twenty minutes of walking the trail came to a halt at the edge of a bank of a river. He stood at the waters edge and watched a leaf float downstream. When he looked back up he saw a young woman emerging from the forest line on the other side of the river some ten meters down stream. She was carrying a wicker basket glistening with bright green apples and kneeled down by the water to wash them. It was early in the morning and it was clear that her sense of propriety and modesty were not yet with her as she was adorned in nothing by a faintly clad white laced robe. Joseph was frozen in place, she for her part had not yet noticed him.

Her complexion was slightly darker than his though in every other way she was far more fair. A rush of emotion flowed through him as he was having thoughts he had not had for some time. Overcome with a reckless disillusionment usually reserved for young boys he stared at her partially exposed lean abdomen and thought of all the ways that it would flow if only given the proper motivation. He took in everything, her cleavage, her legs, her neck, her long black wavy hair, full lips, and tight seductive eyes. Her lack of modesty astounded, perplexed and then again amazed and excited Joseph. He was fearful of being seen but could not peel away. At long last she looked up and smiled as Joseph's heart gave way.

As soon as the moment passed he began to regret not opening his mouth to her, yet only two days would pass before he would catch sight of her again. She was up in a passing tree well into the afternoon picking those same evanescent green apples he had seen her with by the river. Again his mind took flight as she shone in his eyes with more splendor and rhapsody than anything nature had prior to presented him. He was on his way home from what had been a day of work caught in abstraction as, in those briefest of moments by the riverside, her image had stapled itself to his eyes and had rendered him unable to devote the same amount of attention to his duties as he had previously had.

Mustering up more courage than he knew he had Joseph approached the bottom rung of her ladder and peering up asked if she needed any help.

She, without any sign of being startled slowly looked down and smiling said, "you could take this basket from me."

Joseph saw the little plod of brown and green tucked under her arms and with as much grace as he could muster he began to ascend, making sure not to misstep. When he

was two rungs away she stooped down and extended the basket to well within his reach. As she did so a soft breeze came down from between the branches and carried with them her captivating fragrance. It was all Joseph could do not to close his eyes and bask in the moment.

"Thank you, can you bring me that empty one down there."

Joseph obliged, but aside from getting Assira's name made no further progress on this day.

A week passed in which Joseph did all that he could to make himself as visible as possible but still did not get sight of her until a cool night when he had been invited, as he often was, into Kwame's home for a late dinner and some drinks.

There she was, flanked by Kwame and Joseline. As he entered the dining area Kwame's wife motioned to Joseph that he should sit in the seat directly opposite Assira. Laid out between them were bowls of rice, a plate carrying an assortment of vegetables, another with plumply sliced breasts of salmon, and three green apples.

"Joseph, we've heard that you've already met." Joseline said in English. Joseph smiled in confirmation as he looked up and into Assira's eyes. She too smiled in retort as those around them gleaned in with giddy anticipation.

Assira was first to break the tension that rose by reaching towards the head of the table for the avocado, the rest of the guests followed suit as pleasantries quickly picked up and time began passing more swiftly. Joseph and Assira said very little to one another, Joseph for his part just doing all that he could to not get caught staring.

However, when the meal had ended and the procession began filing out he made sure to be there ready to walk her home. Assira seemed to be looking for much of the same thing as they quickly found each other and began walking in succession.

“Well Yosef, do you make a habit of wandering through the trails early in the mornings?”

“Only when I’m searching for something”, to which she giggled.

They continued their playful banter as Assira lead them on a zig zag crossing of the garden. Joseph learned who some of her family was and found some relief to his still lingering anxiety in answering her questions about what his life had been like before coming to the garden.

When they arrived at her home she quickly skipped away without event, though Joseph was afforded a very contented walk back to his house.

Time continued and with its passing their relationship progressed. Walks through pear orchards, nights spent at the observatory, afternoons of cooking, whole days spent following a flock of White Naped Cranes as they danced over rice fields or sitting back watching packs of African Elephants playing by a lake. Whenever they were not together Joseph would dream of her beauty and those little happy feet that sprung to life whenever they would lay eyes on each other.

He would always remember the first time they lay together. They were lying on the slope of a hill watching the moon creep up into the sky, he with his back on the grass, she at an acute angle to him with her head on his chest. He used his hand to caress her neck and that impalpable region between the neckline and where the breasts began to mold. Moving with slow brush strokes back and forth, each time moving further and

further south yet too timid to go all the way. All the while she just smiled with her eyes closed feeling his heart beat and noticed that it started to beat faster when he finally did move his hand over her cleavage and then into her shirt. She turned around, slipped off her gown and lay her body on top of his. It had been a long time since he had been naked in front of a woman, but she never let him feel ashamed. He put his arms around her as she pressed her full lips against his and the rest was as it should be.

They would often stroll together to one of the nearby lakes. And as she would move out into the water, he would watch her, admire her, drench himself in her and begin to know within that she was his, for now and forever. She, with black hair and tanned skin would walk playfully out to the waters edge and dance in childish bliss. And as she frolicked about in a daze of twirls, hops, skips and spins, with her long black hair flowing elegantly about her back as it too found itself playing in the wind, he would do nothing but watch and in so doing could not have been more content.

"So spake our general mother, and with eyes
Of conjugal attraction unreproved,
And meek surrender, half embraced leaned
On our first father, half her swelling breast
Naked met his under the flowing gold
Of her loose tresses hid: he in delight
Both of her beauty and submissive charms
Smiled with superior love, as Jupiter
On Juno smiles, when he impregns the clouds

That shed May flowers; and pressed her matron lip

With kisses pure: aside the Devil turned

For envy, yet with jealous leer malign

Eyed them askance, and to himself thus plained."[16]

In a ritual that seemingly predates all of civilization it was soon time for Joseph to prostrate himself before Assira's family. They had come from a long line of austere women and men that had tilled this land since before the first man arrived, thus they had an esteem to them that seemed to be greater in scope than any other family in the garden. There were two sets of grandparents, a great grandmother, eight pairs of aunts and uncles, nine siblings, six nieces and nephews, and of course Assira's parents themselves.
Her father was as simple a man as could be, he worked diligently from sunrise to sundown and spent his leisure time relaxing, eating, sleeping and playing with his grandchildren. Nothing else seemed to be capable of bringing him any semblance of happiness. He thought wooing the father would be the easy part for he understood the man, or at least believed he did, and had a great deal of respect for him which he believed would be sensed.

The mother was the rump, proud and strong and full of pre-conceived notions about those around her. When first they had met she avoided greeting Joseph, seemingly insisting instead on keeping a distance that would allow her to monitor him at all times.

Joseph had met the family a few times before and each time had in mind their stories and lineage. He thought at first the he should lavish them with gifts but thought a modest approach to be more tactful and came bearing a simple plate of fruit picked from

[16] John Milton, Paradise Lost, book 4, 492-535

the bushes behind his house. He was greeted first by the children who ran to say hello when he was first spotted. He played with the children for a few moments before a loud bark of indigenous vernacular rang though the front entrance, looking up Joseph met eyes with the mother who motioning Joseph to come inside.

Their home comprised a few huts which surrounded a clay enclave with smooth wooden floors and vibrant red brick walls. Joseph was made to sit on the floor where dinner was in the process of being served. Sitting with him was the eldest grandmother, three aunts, two uncles, and some children who could not help but stare. The aunts and uncles carried themselves with solemn dignity but the grandmother, who cared not for such pretenses, immediately dove in with a strict line of questioning. Where Joseph had come from, how he had come here, why he came, why he stayed, what he thought of the place, whose friends he had made in the garden, and so on. Joseph tried to answer every question with poise, trying to keep himself formal but smiling now and then for no other reason than to show his nerves, though the straight forward manner of questioning did a lot to break the tension and awkwardness that had lingered in the void of sound that the questions filled.

Then Assira entered and in an instant all of Joseph's courage returned with her. He had, for a moment, forgotten how beautiful she was, the sight of her again, after not having seen her for two days made his lungs constrict. She walked around in a simple hemp sewn dress, smiled giddily when her eyes locked with Joseph's, and quickly greeted everyone before sitting next to him. The two rarely talked directly over the course of the meal, but the knowledge of her next to him gave Joseph all the strength he would need to get through the evening.

When dinner had finished they moved to another open room, men at one end, women at the other, and the children somewhere out of sight. Joseph found the new arrangement precarious as he could no longer draw on Assira for strength for she was seated with the rest of the women and with her back to him. Joseph knew there to be no escaping this predicament and did his best to be one among the men.

It began in horrid fashion as the men bickered at a pace that Joseph could not keep up with, like a flock of birds squawking at each other, leaving Joseph with no other option but to sit as reverently as possible.

Then, much to Joseph's delight a bottle of some elixir was brought out on the table. A piece of pottery was thrown in front of him and filled to the brim with a brown drink that Joseph hoped was alcohol. Looking up he noticed that all eyes were fixed on him as the oldest in the group motioned for him to drink. He gave a quick glance around at the plastering of eyes truncated on him, noticed that the women had also stopped to stare, looked down at the drink, put it to his lips, tilted his head, and drained the mystery brew in one gulp. Alcohol it certainly was, something akin to rum, it stung his tongue and burned his throat, but warmed his stomach. When its contents were finished he let out a resolute sigh of approval, nodded his head in endorsement and put down the cup. A series of claps and cheers burst forth from both sides of the room. A hearty thud fell on his back as the room rejoiced for a brief instant before Joseph lifted the cup to motion for another to an encore of cheer, animal reverie at its finest. Assira too was staring at him and when chance arose stood up and walked over to him to give him a kiss for all too see, another uproar of laughter and applause burst through.

They fell in love all over again that night, it was then that Joseph realized where the rest of his life would take place.

As if the might of the world bore wit
A disguise as gruesome as the sound

Chapter 17

"Unto this day it dooth myn herte bote

That I have had my world as in my time"[17]

- The wife of Bath

As days piled upon days and months rolled into each other and even years started to blur together the thrust of the gardens embrace was beginning to achieve its desired effect on the quickly aging Joseph. The internal argument that had weighed him down in the time before he met Assira had been subdued, or so he believed, for he no longer thought of escape, of home or the family and friends he had once had. Though as Apollo's bow once pierced leaves weeping wounds that never heal there came a point in time when once again he could not sit idle and with grave persistence his mind raced.

[17] Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The wife of Bath, Geoffrey*. 477-479

Reflections of all the people and places that he had once loved but would never see again rose up, dark thoughts that Joseph strained to forget, though he found that it was useless to fight off for a flash of words had stenciled themselves onto his retina.

A soldier standing guard alone with a
Loaded gun by a powder magazine on
A stormy night gets strange thoughts.[18]

Haunted, Joseph did all that he could to erase them from his memory, yet despite his best efforts they would usually win out. He tried as best he could not to embrace these nightmares, sitting himself on a grassy plain, or perching up on a rock above a waterfall, or climbing a tree to watch the animals below, letting his imagination take off in as many directions as it pleased. It was a wild experience, something he never thought to experience as an adult.

These times brought images that were not always so disconcerting. Some filled with nothing but bliss, a transcendental state of hedonistic indulgences that protracted the mind and gave root to the soul. Blanketing the skies and devouring everything possibly conceived of in an a-priori state of auspicious anthropomorphic disguise. When nothing else matters but the pursuit of bliss, heaven and hell reveal themselves in their entire splendor. An action devoid of proper content but enlivened with soul contention, to be the blessed and progressing self of capricious behavior.

There was also that beautiful dream of the first gardener who arrived after a life time of toil to do nothing else but stop and till the soil. Joseph would remind of himself of

[18] Soren Kierkegaard. Fear and Trembling. Pg 79?

his vision and sink back in delight over the fields of wheat or while gazing off into the distance at wild horses or just watching the children saunter off to school.

Yet the world outside the garden loomed, thoughts of all that had changed, of possible new technologies or changes to the political landscape and the events that supersede them. Above these loomed the thoughts of the family and friends he had once had. He had informed no one of that fateful decision he had made when he had got aboard the *The Matteo Ricci* bound for Algiers, surely some effort would have been made to find him. How extensive such a search could have been Joseph had no way of knowing, obviously not extensive enough. The pain he must have caused to those that he had once loved ripped away at his heart. By this time the life he had left behind would have nephews and nieces, marriages and deaths, doctors and lawyers. A mild and irritating soberness set in and forced him into gluttony and salacious action.

But then he would think about what his day to day life might now have been like had he stayed in that world that once was all he knew. He thought of a white house with a lawn and a sidewalk and a tree with a swing and a four by six flower garden littered with ugly petunias. Standing at the doorway was him, in a suit and tie with an arm wrapped around a little white wife in a little white dress with little white kids.

For days he would lament and ponder and cycle through the moods and passions that such thought conjured up.

Chapter 18

In the end there was only Josephus, who swallowed himself with his actions,
so that all we know of the most influential man to have ever lived is as much as we know
of any other contingent thing,
nothing at all.

Kwame died one day and Joseph found himself at his bed post during his last breaths. There wasn't much for them to say to one another and Joseph was left with the charming image of a man with parted lips, always content, never too bothered by anything, not even his own death. The occasion was marked with no great outcropping of emotion, every person in the garden came by to look, to see, to know for sure what had happened, a few cried, but most stood solemn. No great ceremony was planned, no get

together, not even a meal, just the knowledge that the next day he would be buried and that would be the end of it, the end of him.

Joseph struggled to understand what was happening. A man who had given so much to this place had died and in an instant everyone seemed ready to move on and forget him. How could it be? Surely all were emotionally attached on some level. Did they not see it fit to find some appropriate way of sending him off? These thoughts engendered others which persisted throughout the day and long into the night.

It was a dark hallowed night that gloomed over the garden and Joseph had no patience for sleep. His mind swirled with thoughts that he could not find answers to. He rolled over in bed and stared at Assira. She was deep in sleep and lying on her back, her breathing caused her breasts to move slowly up and down. She was beautiful, too beautiful Joseph thought in a brief moment of excogitative reprieve before a whirlwind of memories once again burst forth, of Johnnie, his parents, the Atlantic, Algiers, the desert, the kids, peyote, those first days in the jungle, Kwame, her, the garden.

Realizing that he was not going to be able to sleep that night he got up and went outside to roam about. The air was crisp and made him feel as though he were home again during one of those cool autumn nights when the leaves were strewn along the streets and the sky was clear enough to make out a few stars. Gazing up he saw that the firmament was exceptionally clear that night leaving the millions of stars above to shine brighter than they had in a very long time, and the moon, while showing only a sliver of itself, was vibrantly luminescent. Looking across the field that lay before him he was struck again by the amount of light pouring out from the heavens as he could make out the shape of all the trees that stood adjacent to him. He walked towards another of the

gaps in the tree line and noticed upon arrival a wedge in the path a hundred or so yards in front of him. Peaked he went to see where the diverging paths may lead. Looking to the left he saw the path gradually moved on a downward slope away from the field he had just been in and towards the shadow of a mountain in the distance. To the right he saw only a sharp turn that seemed to lead back to the bundle of houses from which he came. And so to the left he went, unsure of what it was compelling him to get away from it all.

This pattern continued for several kilometers, a decision would have to be made, left or right, continue or go back, and each time Joseph chose the path that would take him further away from where he had previously been. Once again he found himself aimlessly walking about, along streams, under cliffs, through tight spaces in the trees, up hills and down valleys until he reached a definitive end when another opening had been reached.

In front of him was a field covered with plots of unearthed soil, at the head of each stood trees of differing dimensions adorned with a slab of something grey and a number of scribbled lines engraved upon them. With these pieces in place it became obvious that he was staring at a graveyard. The numbers of grave's Joseph could not easily surmise, but he noticed that he could immediately tell the duration of each plot's existence based solely on the tree that lay at its head. Some were mere saplings, others had the makings of the great tree that they would soon be, others still were beginning to bare fruit, and finally there were extraordinarily large ones arranged mostly at the back standing as great pillars of life cemented into the ground.

Joseph wandered pensively through though being careful enough not to make any missteps. He would stop intermittently to read the inscriptions that had been written and

marvel at the individuals that lay beneath him. He read of immaculate hunters, tireless grandmothers, fervent builders, serene caregivers, magnanimous teachers, diligent children, noble doctors, and flawless gardeners. He also noticed, as he was walking up and down the rows of graves, that those trees that stood at the boundary areas between the forest and the graveyard also had plaques hung from them on which were written various adages ranging in subject from grandiose philosophies to obscure mathematics. A few in particular caught the attention of Joseph and he chose to read them aloud…

Human thought as testament to Thales of Miletus,
who first broke our veil of ignorance and opened the floodgates
by reasoning simply when asked what was older,
night or day,
replied,
‘night, by one day’

On another…

Fear is the only thing that bounds humanity.
It is the only true human universal.
Sadness, happiness, excitement, bewilderment, remorse, drudgery,
Each and more are brought about by differing causes,
only fear is its own mother,
only through the sensation of fear are we bound.

He continued in this manner, roaming aimlessly and stopping here and there to read until he came to a complete halt at a grave that had only recently been dug. No body yet rested here, but Joseph, with his whit's still about him despite the ungodly hour of the day, quickly came to realize who it was that would soon be lying here. At its head, a freshly planted sapling that would have to wait for its strength to grow before any plaque could be nailed to it. An oddly tranquil feeling passed over Joseph as he stared at the hollow grave. In his mind he played out the process that was likely to follow in the coming day, the body placed bare into the ground would slowly get covered with dirt until the grave leveled off with the ground around it. The last moments of action the body would know before the very things it had been designed to do, to move, to wander, to interact with the world, to be a vessel for the mind, would cease for all of time, condemned forever to inaction, to solely rot away, to feed the earth and the life around it, the only destiny left for it. The fate of the conscious, that which truly was Kwame, would never be known, the prospect of it ceasing sent a cold shiver through Joseph. He thought also of the words that will one day be written about the man that was soon to lie here. What few sentences could possibly surmise him? Joseph found himself grateful that the burden of such a task did not fall upon him, or so he hoped.

Again he strolled through the graveyard before coming to a halt again at a grave that seemed to house the oldest of all the trees to be found in this place. A wide sturdy trunk whose diameter far exceeded the width of its grave, its roots had long since dug themselves deep into the earth, pumping life through the great trunk and up into each of the branches that rose far above the earth. Joseph could not tell what kind of tree it was

and in that moment despised himself for not knowing. An odd fruit, bigger than any Joseph had ever seen hung from its mighty branches, despite the hunger that had crept over him, he dared not eat from it. Moving his gaze to the plaque he read allowed the following inscription…

Here lies the first of us, the man who
traveled from sea to sea and overcame
all the horrors of the earth to plant for
us the first seeds of this place we now
call home. To you, Candide, we are
eternally grateful.

Before he could come to any conclusions about what he had just read he noticed for the first time that the sun was beginning to break. With that the direction of his mind changed as he knew that she would be up soon and thinking about him. He decided it best to begin retracing his steps and start making his way back home. As he began his trip he came to realize all of the distance that he had traversed and the amount of time it would take before he found himself back in the embrace of the woman he loved. It gave him more time to think, and though his thoughts were not entirely clear due to his missing out on a night of sleep, he managed to forge through some memories that had long since been stored away.

He thought of his father and the life that he had lived. Joseph always believed his dad to have been a brilliant man who could have engaged himself in any profession he so

pleased, but factory life was what he loved. He remembered a day in elementary school when all the children had to write about their ‘caregivers’ and he had chosen to write about what his father’s day might be like. Strolling through the strange forest Joseph remembered the story as such…

The factory work was hard but satisfying, all day spent hammering, bolting, fastening, cutting, sawing, riveting, jawing, torqing, adjusting, screwing, sealing, varnishing, painting, packaging, removing, breaking, disposing, moving, and aligning. The end of the day was glorious, joints ached, muscles seized, fingers throbbed, eyes weary, skin dirty, hair muffled, nose clogged, throat dry, but the mind at ease. At home awaited nothing but a hot shower, a big meal, happy kids, loving wife, a comfy couch and plenty of books.

Joseph always remembered how his father had looked when he would first sit down in that big ol brown leather chair. He’d set a book down next to his cold beer on the little table, gently ease himself into the cushions, push back the recliner, kick up the footrest, take a long drink, let out a big happy sigh and crack open his book. Thinking back he knew that not every day went like that, some days there would be something to fix or mend around the house, those were always his grumpiest days. Or others he would spend with Joseph or his wife. But it was the evenings in the big recliner that Joseph remembered most.

With the thoughts of his father came the images of the man who had preceded him, his grandfather and an evening they had spent together at a cottage by a lake.

His grandparents were simple people who were simple in their needs and desires and who had lived a fairly auspicious life. They owned a small villa in a suburban

neighborhood just outside of the big city, never liked to commute, kept a close company of friends and were gracious and always giving with their money and possessions.

The family would take trips up to rented cottages and try to do nothing productive for a week. It was in those weeks where Joseph first learned how to cook, how to clean, how to construct, how to fish, and how to apply oneself to the world around him. It was late one night, the sun had long since set, when Joseph found himself on the dock, his little legs dangling over the side, seated next to his grandfather. Joseph was too young at the time to have any preconceived notions of anybody, he only knew who he loved and who he didn't. His grandfather happened to belong to the former group and Joseph remembered being in love with him as they sat quietly gazing up at the stars. His grandfather could see the wonder that filled Joseph's tiny eyes, he didn't often get to see stars in such abundance. And so they sat for a while, the boy with this head tilted straight up and his eyes darting back and forth across the heavens while the old man stared blissfully at the little boy.

Joseph's grandfather was usually not one to espouse much wisdom upon anybody. He had lived a hard life in his earlier days and thought it wise to leave each to his own thinking. But for whatever reason the old man chose this moment to break from such traditions as he took Joseph by the hand and began telling the boy something that was once told to him by his great grandfather when he had been a little boy.

"Look at your hand Yoey," the old man gestured to show how he wanted it done, with the right palm brought up close to the face.

"I want you to try and imagine something for me. Look up at the stars again," and so the boy did, "Now look back down at your hand. Imagine that our earth and everything

that you knew fit in your hand like a baseball". The boy struggled to do as he was told, but with a little extra guidance seemed to have conjured up the desired image.

"Now shrink it….keep shrinking it….shrink it so small that you can't even see it anymore, that it disappears into your hand, into one of the tiny little lines that you see in your hand, got it?"

The boy squinted and strained and soon after muttered, "Uh hum".

"Now I've got a secret to tell you" says the old man in the weightiest of voices that he could muster, one that young little Joseph had never heard before. "Look up again, you see all those stars up there, how many do you think there are up there?"

"A thousand!" little Joseph shouted out.

The old man chuckled "There are millions Joseph, millions and millions and then even more millions of them," the boy seemed perplexed, he couldn't possibly contemplate that many of anything. His mind shifted as he blurted out, "but where do they come from?"

"From your hand Joseph" the boy looked back down again, eager to find those millions of little shiny things, but all he could see was the little earth he had created with all of the people and all of the things he knew on it.

The grandfather didn't say another word, Joseph didn't ask anymore questions, he just moved his gaze from his little palm to the stars before dropping his hands, lying himself on his back and just taking in all that was before him.

With his memories coming to an end and his eyes fixated on the path in front of him Joseph's mind fell back on the garden and the mass of grandsons that had walked through this place, those that had built the bamboo bridge over the south river, the

outcropping above the big waterfall, the irrigation system in the farms, the houses, the barns, the walkways, the paths through the forest and everything else contained within. Before he knew it he had cleared the forest, passed through his doorway, and was back in bed snuggled up against his softly breathing wife. He closed his eyes and dreamed the morning away.

And so it was, years piled upon years, the garden grew, Joseph aged, and in the end he died, to be forgotten in all places but this.