

At seven years a second thing would take him by surprise. The teacher's fingers ringed his wrist with questions in her eyes. He was so thin he almost seemed a phantom in disguise. And too, the moon raised questions beyond its need to rise.

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Within the conventionality of an unconventional life, two days of magical phosphorescence levitated its strife. The midpoint of his ninth and subsequent year, the dawning of summer, the horizon so clear, and cascades of time both far and near. School was a burden but summer's release conditioned the form of penultimate peace. And cascades of time that would never cease.

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We seek the sense beyond the sound. What we see will not be found. Words obscure the fertile ground where words, knee-deep, abound.

Joshua chose with either hand, respecting the customs of the land. He lived within ambidextrous space, where left and right had left no trace. What passed for others as direction, Joshua met with circumspection. He relied on other cues—convection currents, native hues—to steer his singular course toward each hypothetical source of meaning and despair. Which meant he had to master the subtle trick of walking on air.

But what will come, truth be told, will not come unless we're bold.

If Albert Schweitzer the public forgot, what can have been Alfred North Whitehead's lot? *Science and the Modern World* for Joshua new fields unfurled. Having long hovered in physics and math, he sought the view from a higher craft. By accident. Science was the book's superficial sheen, philosophy its deeper theme. Joshua crossed over as in Dante's dream, starting from rigor and ascending the mean.

The city groaned and glittered perspective, serving as a brusque corrective to the pallor of his pride. Even a pedestrian subway ride managed to chafe and chide each abstraction far and wide. See him naked, nowhere to hide. Hear him stumble side to side. Feel his grasping for a guide. And still the city will abide.

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Onward now we go, to study what we think we know compared to what is truly so—a process Socrates began, to die the model of a man, over two millennia ago.

The time had come to read the sum of Western philosophic thought. To discover what had been tried and taught. From Plato to Aquinas to Descartes to Hume. Kant and Kierkegaard and Russell to consume. And everyone in between, before and after, were the authors he tried to master. As deities start counting tears in the early teenage years.

And his muse sustained him as she constrained him to focus on each present task, to use to purpose his chameleon's mask, and never in vanity or laurels to bask.

From west he traveled east to weigh the words that had released ascetics from a wheel of fire. He joined Stoics and Siddharthas in fistings to disarm desire. Soon he would produce essays of his own design, attempting to deduce satisfactions for a rational mind. Or something of the kind.

And then a girl from Oz appeared and waved her magic wand—a second muse to guide him to enchantment and beyond. She taught him how to read the patterns in a rippled pond, as at the moment of creation and every moment on.

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Under her spell he learned to dwell in rhythm and in rhyme, and to address each pregnant stress in the silences of time.

Induction became a recurring concern: how we can know the future, how we can ever learn. And how we can escape the imaginings of fate. What we know and what to sow, what we can assume. And every mode of exit from a cloistered room—the tragic vision of the world and certainty of doom.

And the climate and the soil that Eden needs to bloom.

These obsessions formed processions of symbols in the mind. Abstractions of subtractions detailed and refined.

An answer to a dancer choreographed to a will resigned, but seeking a solution in symbols of another kind.

Something he could not be sure that he would ever find.

She wore no shoes, confessed no clues, even as she taunted rules only made for summer schools. She had dark hair, a pliant stare, and blithely moved through fractured air without resistance, without care. For hers were the kingdoms of the fragrant and fair. And her scepter was power everywhere.

But Joshua, laden with care, did not dare to greet her.

Then she faded away, in the heat of an August day.

It was the simulacrum of a dream. Or so to others it would often seem. A madman's state of mind we cannot glean. A bird of prey with vision all too keen. Suspended high above and in between the hope that dreams say more than they can mean.

And Joshua awakened cold and covered in a moonlit sheen.

Martin Luther could not leave confessionals at bay. He lived within recycled sin resistant to decay. Try as he might he could not fight the curse within the clay. And so did soul and circumstance divert themselves one day.

Spirits do not boast but pay witness to the host. They parse the terror and the horror, not the dolor or the farce. And seek to release a brodequined bone and draperies of flesh from a sparrow's home, elevated and alone.

And Catherine sends her legions forth, to embolden Joan on her journey north, towards a trembling star. And her only trace is the wind on your face, blowing from afar.

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Now we go further back to fill a conspicuous gap. Age is hearsay, says the sage. When we think we came to be is elemental mythology. One day Joshua asked a friend, "Does philosophy have a patron saint to help secure its end?" On November 25 of a misplaced year she called from Huntsville to reveal Saint Catherine as the keeper of the seal. The learned Catherine of the elevated wheel, whose voice led Joan to her choice and her appeal. And so was Joshua born on the feast-day of a tortured form. The feast day of philosophy in the shadow of a dragon tree.

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He walks the streets of secret retreats in search of tantalizing conceits. And the people he meets share provocative feats choreographed to strangely syncopated beats. While contorted deceits are Halloween treats masking defeats at a mixer or bar. And commensurately, Joshua's journeys for keys are reversibly bizarre. A thermodynamics for a riddling planet engaged to a middling star.

He was the star of the seminar, or so they maintained. Which had its rewards, he soon ascertained. Especially in a philosophy course. After his lengthy and cogent discourse. On Descartes. Or Hume. Sense data. Or, maybe, what we assume. It's now foggy, or soggy, or he's groggy, we presume. But at the time . . . whenever he'd look across the room, she'd stare back, her face in bloom. Then she approached, of her own volition, and quickly encroached on his human condition. Angelique Armand Delille bore a name a queen might steal. An early Picasso and a later Gaul would have bound her a femme fatale. But her voice flew free, and her choice would be an elegant profundity.

She led him to Malraux—fatefully, as events will show.

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Then she had to go—sadly, not madly. Perhaps so Joshua's destiny could grow. Though we, as he, will never know.

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If not philosophy, for a spell, what could serve him equally well? Time to take a continental break. In the wake of Keats and Blake. To replenish a reactive core. So off to an island with an ancient lore. And a monument to a rising sun. At the moment when summer's lust has just begun.

Magazines show scenes of where a nation leans. And what they choose to quote can be an antidote to sagas learned by rote.

Even in a perfume ad catering to a current fad Lear can go mad.
And when he does Cordelia comes to mirror what he was. And
when she goes the king still knows her voice was the song of the
rose.

He came to the land with music in hand, but during the night fate
hurled a demand. A stroke of lightening and destiny spoke, the
player broke, and Joshua awoke. By the end of the day his
rhythmic concern would take a sharp linguistic turn. So much the
better to discern the import of Browne's resurrected urn. And
rings of sacred things that poetry wraps in a cello's strings.

Poe is sonorous in his woe. Sufficiently so to substitute for the
mandolin and lute. If we are astute, as Joshua, and follow suit.
That poetry is sublimity, preferentially mute.

As the notes that Beethoven couldn't hear penetrate and sear.
And Cordelia's voice, "soft, gentle, and low," answers the mad
King Lear.

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He learned the subject on a subway train, under a river and back
again. For the previous summer, in a line by chance, he re-met a
girl, as in a trance, who saw him as her knight in France. She
came to the city to live and learn. And soon would discern the
sound of the dance to enhance their every circumstance.
And this was a dance he had to dance. For life to have a chance.

Fate conceived the date when Dr. Zhivago would play again. In a
theater for revivals, showing at half past ten. And on the fulcrum
of their way, the day the MCAT had its say, and dinner proposed
a binding display, the epic film held little sway. They watched it
(barely) restlessly, left early and distractedly, and ran heatedly
and breathlessly to their new-born destiny.

In the hour that the river's tide flowed out to the open sea.

What Isaac Newton never knew Joshua began to brew: the ages
and wages and rages of two.

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Unlike Newton and the glowering oak. Was the apple tree that
shook with glee.

Good in the end for Newton, and a race perplexed by a
motionless sun.

When it is so clearly a traveling one.

But the obvious is a starting block. Not the rock of justification.

Falling fruit proved a blessing, not a curse. Where not even a
sparrow can drop to earth without upending a universe.

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Galileo claimed too much. As did the Church, which likes to fuss.
As did Galileo. And both would paint with too broad a brush. But
the Talmud didn't rush. And carefully considered why God
delivered the Ten Commandments to a minor hill. When a
monumental majesty better fit the bill. And what did the scholars
propose? That God chose modesty over majesty, because God
inclines to humility.

And so it need not mar creation, that the race rides a minor
planet—truth to tell, a carousel—around an otherwise
undistinguished star. Earning by circumference a dizzying sense
of what we are.

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Hair is the sister of air. And blond's an illusionist's wand. And care is a heartless dare. And she electrified the air. And blinded a blind man's care. Making us all aware that beauty isn't fair. But a landscape of despair. On earth. In heaven. Anywhere.

Twenty minutes earlier he was sitting near the sand. Deciding, this one time, to wait for fate to play its hand. Rather than walking across the beach to find an interest he might command. To fascinate or captivate, one must never hesitate. As proof of a confident stand. For everyone knows how hard it is to conquer an unknown land. And the first advance cannot be bland, overcooked, or canned. Or one will only win the companionship of sand.

At the zenith of such thoughts as these, when the sun aligns with trees, Joshua felt a sudden breeze. The atmosphere parted, creatures darted, and onto the whiteness she stepped open-hearted.

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Medicine imposed a rigorous code. Do not give in to horror, cunning in its mode. For mortality is the trail through which the devil rode. And decay and putrefaction its celebratory ode.

Medicine was put in place to argue its retraction. In devices, as vices, to effectuate contraction. But at the intersection of intention and rejection, medicine has yet to drive erosion to dejection.

But for the moment let's commit to technological intervention. And test its claim to be the talisman we pray to see. Urgently. Immediately. Before the patient erodes for free.

It's 2:50 now. Ideally we'd like it by a quarter past three. If that's not asking too much of a current deity. Present life has standards; we're not as patient as we used to be.

It's 3:30 now, and just as I feared, another missed opportunity. But we'll keep waiting, till the sun sets in the sea. And the light goes out on reality.

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School's back in session. Where, unofficially, most of his classmates focused quite critically on the future design of their swimming pools. Others would obsess, and try to assess, the power of white coats to intimidate and impress. While for some the issue was how best to guard the market value of an MD degree (in medical terminology, a union card). But almost unanimously they would agree that they were more valuable than you times three.

Except Joshua, who felt he was falling short of his calling. And his friend in the class, a student of religion and cell division, who found such thinking appalling.

To mark the new year, and the first six months of their medical career, he and his friend decided to attend a concert. In a hall with levels and flights of stairs. About which a young person rarely thinks or cares. But on this night his friend displayed a limp, attributed to a bicycle incident. That had occurred two weeks before. And so concern was delayed. But not allayed.

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A diagnostic evaluation is always met with trepidation. Especially for medical students, for whom hypochondria is a vocation. (Until sufficient clinical experience corrects their paranoid ideation.)

The tests took ten days to appraise. And as to the result . . . however catastrophically one might designate it, would be obscenely to understate it.

Rabdomyosarcoma.

He was engaged to be married. To a young woman as sweet and gentle as himself, and as deserving of life and love and happiness in inexhaustible measure. And he did marry.

Shortly before he was laid to rest. In the bright sunlight of a gently sloping hillside. With all the world extending before him.

Six months later. In the first week of his sophomore year. At the age of 21.

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But now let's advance to brighter things. Cycling fast at last through mod4 springs. And see what perspective a fresh star brings. Within the Constellation of the Car. Not far from the Consolidation of the Scar, to the east of the Cluster of the Rings. Through which a new-born sky sings.

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And they come with such a force, to overwhelm remorse. And their truth is the tooth of desire. Taut as the strings of the lyre.

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The art of the word may not part the sea. But can visual art go on a spree, and show the world what it means to be free? And turn the long-sought key.

Let's see.

To what degree a painted chapel can reverse the damage of an unresisted apple.

Eventually the time would come to beat the slow but steady drum of mortal life come to sum.

He'd never see his father cry, until the moment would arrive to bid his wife goodbye. As she left on her journey to surgery that she would not fully survive.

An outcome not quite as good as to die.

Despite each optimistic lie.

Vanquished with a sigh. And laid to rest with a lullaby.

Much as Hindus would try to coax their children not to cry, but just "look at the world going by."

The aneurysm burst on the operating table. Transforming her life from fiction to fable. For her memory would now be smooth as sable. And tears were due, for as long as she was able, to see through and through what she could no longer label.

She was herself, less a few percent, but just ask God what decimals meant when the world was young and heaven sent. And how they prevent an apocalyptic event. And how a mind once supple can be irreversibly bent. At the price of a few percent.

Her father was an early master of computers, and ran a great city's system. But she was one of the world's great disputers. And told cold lies. And one could scarcely resist them. And she could

talk, as others walk: without thought or effort. And she was better without clothes than anyone would ever suppose. As many a man knows. And which, for a fee, she'd agree to disclose. As almost everyone knows. And so she chose to sleep her young womanhood away. Because of the pay, from her very first half-legal essay. And shame and guilt felt they'd rather not stay. Suspicious as they were of her claim that she used her nights to play. And downplayed the question of pay. Insisting she'd have done it anyway. But then, she always held truth at bay.

Periodically she'd call. But Joshua had put up a mending wall. That took two months to fall. By the fourth of July the wait had precipitated a date. Conventional, if late.

She lived with her sister who had a young child. And both smiled the same Hellenic smile. As a siren, with just a hint of guile. Dark and brooding but soothing all the while.

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Her waitress job didn't pay well but at least she served without having to sell. And lived stories a daughter could show and tell. But Joshua, as we have said, never read fate in a marriage bed.

And so she stole away one day instead.
And how did Joshua react to her disappearing act?

He didn't attack, but painted her back. Until her soul came to dwell in pastel.

And that nothing would go awry, he also painted goodbye to the sister of the serpentine lie.

But why do women abandon him so furtively?

You tell me.

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