

THE SACRIFICE

Steven L. Peck

Mnemosyne

She was still puzzled that the stars were not the same ones she knew. She corrects. That she used to know. Where was Orion, its belt and sword glowing bright with mythic power against the black as it did from the La Sal mountains? Where was Cygnus, the swan? Where was the North Star; the end of the dipper gesturing towards it while circling it round and round through the night? The names for the stars sounded strange on her tongue. Beetlejuice. Rigel. As if the appellations that belonged in the Northern Hemisphere, viewed from some familiar longitude she knew by heart, could not be countenanced in this valley. Wait. Even the words “Northern Hemisphere” and “longitude” seemed foreign and out of place, as if from some other universe or dimension—so other that they had no real truck anymore in her mind, and it took effort to bring them out from dark corners. Maybe “The Dipper” never existed and was from some fantastic tale that in the light of day betokened a fantasy or a fable of some kind, not a reality she could grasp from the village. These old words dredged from possibly imaginary constellations might not have ever existed in any meaningful way. Ghost words. Words from another realm that only haunted this one from an oblique angle, like a shadow skittering away in the corner of your eye on a windy night. Maybe she’d always lived here? No. She couldn’t believe that. It would make it easier to believe in such a wonderland fantasy, but she could not. This had only been her home for a little over a year. She shook off the doubt. *This* was the unreal place. As nearly ordinary as it was, it had to be the dreamscape. A place where myths resided and a person’s only duty seemed to be to lament losses. Maybe she’d

gone mad. That was possible. Or died. In some ways that even made the most sense. Either seemed more likely than the idea that her life before coming here had not been real.

She sighed as the cuckoo clock—what an absurd contrivance for this place to include—began its slow whirl, signaling the little blue and white bird was about to pop from its hiding place and begin to chirp its rhythmic song. Four calls—it was 4 a.m., of what day of the week no one in the village could rightly reckon. Days of the week had been sacrificed upon arrival to this nearly timeless place. She moved to the window and watched the empty cobbled street basking in soft starlight, the windows of the houses on the other side were dark and shuttered. She looked up and down the dark street, but the window was aligned parallel with the road so she could not see far in either direction, even had it had not been dimmed by the night. She listened carefully for the clicking that would announce their passing but heard nothing. Should she open the door and step out onto the porch to glimpse them lurching and floating and heaving down the road? Should she dare their malice and taint? She knew the cost and so with ease resisted any temptation toward such an action.

After staring out the window for a time, she left her small drawing room and returned to her bedroom. She needed at least a few hours of sleep. All was as it should be—her dark oak four-poster bed, stilted to an over-moderate height above the floor so that a small ladder was necessary to mount the bed, the beautiful quilt atop, suggesting an almost stained-glass effect depicting a woman in a flowing gown, rising from a river, with cattle and fish gathered around her—all bespeaking comfort and warmth. At one end of the well-made bed, fine linen sheets slid out from the quilt and folded over its top edge. The head of the bed was graced with a long down pillow. To the side sat her chest of drawers, which held, respectively in each drawer, (top) her white cotton undergarments, (second) her calf-length simple blue tabinet smock dresses, and (third) her stockings and various kerchiefs, and in the last her shawls and thicker socks which served as slippers, along with a few extra pillowcases she kept on hand. At one end of the cozy room was a red brick fireplace with a small, neatly stacked supply of quartered hardwood logs lying on the hearth.

It was currently unlit, but below the fire grate it sported a good supply of ash on the firebox floor. Next to her bed was an end table with a small kerosene lamp and a book from the lending library—Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle*. Various candle holders extended from several places along walls, with their candles currently unlit. On the floor was a round, off-white, braided wool rug. Near the bed was a window with soft yellow gingham curtains, pulled back to permit a view. In the daylight, it would reveal a sloping grassy hill that led to a pine forest. She decided not to write in her journal tonight and just took off her dress, dropped it on the floor, crawled into bed, and stared at the carved wooden moldings and beams of her ceiling. Sleep, however, did not come quickly.

This was her one-year anniversary in the village. She went over her arrival again in her mind. Nothing was clear, and she sometimes feared she was creating memories as much as recalling them. She thought she remembered seeing the cluster of houses from above, all in a lovely green valley surround by tall, formidable mountains. The implacable peaks that relentlessly guarded the valley each had a forest marching up its side up to the timberline before yielding to dark grey rock, glacier, and snow. How could she have seen it from above? Had she been in a helicopter? A hang glider? No, there was something dreamlike about it. There was a faint memory of something like crossing a border, and then crossing some ill-defined boundary gliding down, as if the invisible hand of an invisible being were placing her here. Anyway, it was unclear. Too dreamlike to be real. No details of her coming here could be genuinely reconstructed. The memories of the week previous to her arrival, however, were quite clear: she was trekking in the Andes with her fiancé Jorge, a returned missionary and graduate of Duke University in finance, but how had she come here? Why had no one tried to find her? Why no search planes? In fact, over the course of a year she had never even seen a contrail. She knew she was in an isolated place. And most disturbing of all, there seemed to be no way out of the valley.

When she first arrived, people had been so helpful. They welcomed her, helped her get settled with a roommate who spoke her language—a Scottish woman named Meg who had been here five years and whose previous

roommate recently had been “emptied” as they called it. The former roommate now lived in the big house near the edge of town with others in like condition. One year. She had been here a year. The ceiling began to blur as once again her eyes filled with tears and she wept, as she had so many times, that she had lost everything and there seemed no way to ever get it back. And once again, as she had for a year, she drifted off to sleep listening to the night wind discreetly murmuring through the nearby forest and questing through the narrow cobbled streets of her little town.



She slept late. There had been some commotion fairly early, but she refused let herself rise to attend to it, so she turned over and returned to her dreams. She finally arose as the sun had just cleared the mountains and bathed the valley in late morning sunshine. She went to the toilet and wandered into the kitchen, where Meg was seated at the table having a cup of coffee. She saw her eyes, swollen and red, but now dry. She knew what it meant.

“Who?” She said covering her mouth, perhaps to avoid a scream.

“Kartari” Meg said softly, “Poor Kartari.”

“How?”

“She was playing cards at the public house with some of the emptied. She lost track of the time. When she realized how late it was she decided to chance it. It was only a hundred meter dash.” She paused and looked a long time into nothing in particular, then added choking back a sob, “She was unlucky.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I saw her walking by on my way to get some bread so stepped out to talk to her. Yes I’m sure. She told me the story herself.”

She looked at Meg and nodded and sagged into her chair. It did not take a long conversation to recognized the emptied.



That afternoon she and her friend Xhi took their small packs loaded with a green-leaf bamboo basket of lamb curry and rice and left the village to continue their search for a way out. They had searched most of the valley already, but they were returning to some sites they had initially rejected but had decided they deserved a closer look. Most of their efforts ended only in discouragement. At the south end of the valley, the wide, pebbly creek running between the mountains descended into a ravine two hundred meters below. The edge of the cliff over which the river plunged was a granite wall as smooth as glass all the way to the canyon floor below this valley. To the east and west, featureless cliffs rose until they met the mountains above. From peaks in the northwest, the small river poured into the valley from a series of violent cascades with seven waterfalls, with twenty- to seven-hundred-meter drops much like she remembered in the Yosemite Valley. So far, they had discovered no hope of escape. Even so, today they were heading to the western wall where a new idea had taken hold of them. It was the shortest vertical cliff in the valley— only about thirty meters to where it looked like there were talus slopes covered with scattered conifer trees to the timberline, followed by a steep, but not unmanageable, climb to the saddle between two goal-posting crags. They had spent a few days last week looking through binoculars, scouting a route to the top, and tracing into their notebook what looked like a pathway to the mountain pass if they could ascend up the initial cliff face. This could be the way out.



On the way up they talked. Or tried to. When they started this project four months ago, Xhi spoke no English and she no Chinese. But over the course of the months they had developed a fairly serviceable communication system that included gestures, words they had shared with each other, pointing, making faces, imitating the sounds of nature, drawing in the dirt or in a notebook, using their fingers and hands to make shapes and mimic the processes they wanted to depict, holding up certain fingers to represent numbers and amounts,

and acting out in pantomime their intentions or the actions of others they wanted to communicate. Their vocabulary was now nearing five-hundred English words (Xhi seemed better at managing her English than she was his Chinese) and perhaps 100 Chinese words and characters. She had learned this: Xhi was a paleontologist. He and his wife met at the university where he taught, and she may have been his student. She may be an artist. They had a grown son named Wu who taught something—Xhi had tried to explain but she didn't understand quite yet—that made his father very proud, and they had all been very happy. He had been digging for bird fossils somewhere in China when he had been brought here. He was fifty-seven years old and loved to sing and garden. He did not believe in God, but now he was not sure because this place did not fit with what he believed. His father either made or sold umbrellas or maybe did something in the rain. His mother had died. He had been here eight years. She thought he understood that she had studied botany in college, was in love with a man from Paraguay, and they had been about to be married when she had arrived here. That she did believe in God, but this place had confused her and did not fit with what she believed either. She was twenty-four. She loved to read and play video games. She had a cat named "Carnage," and she was sure he did not know what the word meant.



When they arrived at the foot of the cliff, she broke several large sticks into short pieces, and pulling out some string from her pocket she began tying the sticks together making a model of some sort of scaffolding that resembled the tower forest rangers used to watch for fires. This she placed against the face of the rock wall. He looked at it and then at the rock wall before him. He picked it up and pointed to some large branches, and after nodding to the little structure, picked it up and pointed to the string tying the little twigs together and shrugged. With what would they tie the logs together? String would not do. In answer, she pulled a strip of bedding she had shredded and then twisted into a kind of rope-looking configuration. He handled it and

gave a series of sharp tugs, and then pursed his lips and nodded with wide eyes. This might work. “I like,” he said. She lowered her head and said, “Xièxiè.”

The truth was they could get bedding any time they wanted. The little mercantile, as Meg had first introduced the place, carried fresh bedding, food from various locals, spices, rice, wheat flour, sugar, the clothing that everyone wore, pans, condiments, gardening tools, scissors, supplies for quilting, needle point, potters wheels and clay and pigments, wood carving tools, an assortment of crafts, paper goods, a fairly impressive selection of musical instruments, writing implements—even typewriters, and lots of things that might come in handy for not being bored like telescopes and such things. Some things were missing: nails, hunting equipment (not that anyone had seen any animals here), medicines (no one in anyone’s memory had ever seen someone sick), weapons, rope, explosives, anything made from fossil fuel like plastics (all implements were made from metal and wood, even the aforementioned type-writer), and detergents (all soiled clothes were placed in a bin in the mercantile), and new ones picked up at will. No money was exchanged. You took what you needed and that was that. Who or what replaced the items carried away was a mystery. No resupplier was ever seen coming or going, yet every morning the bins of dirty clothes were empty, and anything taken was replaced. Some spoke of underground tunnels, others of Star Trek transporter technologies. But it was a fact of life nothing new ever appeared, and nothing in the store became scarce. This is why most believed they were prisoners. Things could get in and out. They could not. The inference: they were being kept.



They spent the rest of the afternoon constructing twig and string prototypes. This could work. This could really work. There was an excitement building between them. They might get out of this place yet. Whatever was keeping them as pets had not secured the cage quite as well as they thought.

Simultaneously they looked up and noticed how far the sun had dipped; it was touching the western mountains. They looked at each other with a panicked expression and stood up and started scampering back to the village, but not before grabbing a few of the prototypes to show the others. By the time they got back to the village, they were out of breath, but smiling broadly as they parted back to their homes. This could work!



The village consisted of slightly more than three-hundred people from all over the world. About a third were from China and another third from India. The rest were a mix of nationalities from all over the world; she was the only American. There were many Muslims, Catholics and other Christians, Buddhists. About sixty were among the emptied. Unexpectedly, there were few conflicts. Both sexes were represented equally, and their ages ranged from about nineteen to ninety-one. Resources were abundant. What would you steal when everyone had the same things you did? Crime was possible, however. Meg had recounted that about five years ago a man from a notoriously patriarchal culture had attacked a woman. However, her screams had brought help in time to stop the assault. Meg said the village had voted to have the man tied up outside during the night. It was a severe punishment, but most agreed that such actions could not be tolerated. To ensure he was emptied, a group of women and some men kept vigil from a window in one of the houses where they could watch. When the night horrors came through the streets, they saw the monsters empty the man. In the morning, the attacker calmly observed the other villagers as they cut him loose. They asked him how he felt and he said he felt healthy and able to do the tasks life required of him. He joined the others who had been emptied in the large house at the end of the street.

For the most part, however, things were calm. Neighbors respected each other's privacy. All in all the society took care of each other as needed, and supported each other's plans and goals. They even rearranged the cricket

and football teams every year, assembled randomly from among those who wanted to play. Usually, enough people signed up for one or the other or even both sports to field five or six teams. And making new teams every year kept villagers from establishing long-term rivalries, so it remained a source of fun and recreation.

She was also grateful there were four Mormons, a disproportionate number given the demographics of Earth, which all four took as a genuine miracle. They would meet once a week on a day they designated the Sabbath and read from a Spanish Book of Mormon that had been found in the library. She had served a Spanish-speaking mission in California, and she would translate into English for two of the others—a Belgian man, who had been a member for his whole life; and a Syrian woman, an English teacher, who had joined in Germany. The last was a woman from Brazil who was learning English but could understand the Spanish well enough not to need the translation. After reading the scriptures, the Belgian (as the only priesthood holder in the village) would bless the sacrament and then pass the bread and water to the others. Then they would bear their testimonies and share a simple meal together. Sometimes her roommate, Meg, would join, as she missed her Anglican church and found fellowship with the little congregation.



She and Xhi made it back to the village well before dark. While the strange fearsome monsters would assail people they found out in the valley as soon as the sun dipped below the horizon, they did not enter the village until the clocks struck ten. First, they would gather on the cricket pitch in the field on the far end of the village—humming and clicking with their inhuman sounds. Once they had amassed there, the folk had about fifteen minutes to get back to their homes from wherever they were gathered—the pub, the baths, the library, the public house, the mercantile, or just visiting friends. When the creatures gathered, someone who had been assigned the rotating duty would clang an old copper kettle loudly, the sound of which could be heard throughout the village, to warn everyone to retire for the night into



Jackie Leishman
Yosemite 29
printmaking ink, paint, and collage on paper
24 x 18 inches

the safety of their homes. There were no locks on the doors, but they were safe. The creatures never entered a structure.

Tonight at the pub a large group had gathered around Xhi as he explained the plan to build a ladder out of the branches of trees and ropes made from linen—a ladder that would reach the top of the lowest cliff surrounding the valley. They would escape. Most of the crowd was Chinese, but there were a number of others listening to translations of Xhi's voice into Hindi, English, Spanish, French, and other common languages. She watched from her cup of chamomile tea. The conversation was animated and lively. She listened to a Han woman named Bao translating into British English for about ten other eavesdroppers who understood the language. Most of the discussion focused on how unsafe it seemed, but a few had concerns of a more metaphysical nature. An older man named Akpofure, from Nigeria, looked upset as Xhi offered the details about the plan; suddenly the African stood up and said, "No, No, No! This will lead to ruin! Don't you see, if you do this they will punish us all? It is the tower of Babel. You know the tower of Babel? Very bad. Why leave this beautiful valley? Are we not given everything we need by God? Give this up. I beg you. Give it up."

At the man's words, she looked up and stood and took his hands and looked into his eyes with that familiarity the villagers shared. "No, we don't have everything we need. I don't have Jorge."

He looked at her and slowly pulled his hands away. He mumbled something in Urhobo, and, although she did not understand it, she could tell she had not convinced him. Tired of the discussion, she was going to do this whether anyone helped her or not. Meg was in the corner playing a dulcimer, so she walked over to listen. She sat there thinking until the copper kettle began to clang in alarm and everyone fled to their homes.



Meg had gone to bed, but she found some soup still warm on the wood stove, so she ladled a bowl and sat down at the maplewood table. As she ate, she

thought about Kartari. Of course she had gotten distracted playing poker with the emptied. They were tireless, excellent players. They gave no tell and could bluff stoically without giving anything away. They took no joy in the game. They were playing because they had been asked to, but what was it about their emptiness that let them play to win? Because it was an expectation? Did they understand that their old selves would not have wanted them to play otherwise, so they enacted that desire? They never played by themselves. She remembered once visiting their big house when she had first arrived. They all were just sitting around, silently looking out into the space before them at nothing in particular. When she walked in, all their eyes turned toward her, and someone asked how they could help. When she said they wanted to see if they had any scraps of cloth because they were going to make a quilt, one man stood and walked into another room; as he did all their eyes returned forward and they just stared unfocused into the space before them. She remembered the horror she felt as she looked at them sitting like that. Without purpose. Now as she thought of Kartari she shuddered again. Kartari was funny. A delight in conversation. She could deliver a good joke like no one in the village. She would never tell another. Not spontaneously anyway. She could be asked to, and she would do so. She would not laugh, and it would be delivered without inflection or cadence. It would just be said. What was the point of this place? She wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand and got up from the table and went to bed. But unlike last night, she fluffed her pillow and sat up in bed and wrote a few lines in her journal,

My Beloved. We lost another today. Kartari. A lovely person in every way. You would have liked her. I will miss her laugh and her optimism. She never doubted we would leave this place. She always spoke of when we got back she would do this, she would be better at that. Now she's a shadow person—

What did you do today? Did you feel me hugging you with my mind? Did you feel my thoughts drifting toward you? Did you just have to shout out loud! 'Someone out there loves me!?!'—

It's been over a year. I've missed you every day since I arrived. Don't give up on me. Please don't give up on me. I'll find you again.

She closed her journal and turned down the lamp. She fell asleep quickly this time.



They were sweating with exertion as they continued to cut the large branches away from the tree they had felled earlier that morning. Having put in some good work, they decided to take a break for lunch. She had taken off her smock to keep cool during their labors. Her underwear was usually modest enough, but her sweat was starting to soak through, making it less so. Still, it would be uncomfortable to do the lumberjacking they were doing in one of the smocks, so Xhi would just have to endure her exposure today. She made a mental note to alter a smock and make a belt to connive a more functional chopping ensemble. They sat on the trunk of a pine that lay sprawled on the carpet of pine needles that went all the way up to the face of the cliff they were going to try to scale. She handed him a tuna sandwich she'd made, and they sat side by side talking about the day's labor and slowly nibbling at their sandwiches. She noticed he was sitting close enough that their thighs were touching, and she could feel the body heat coming from his morning exertions. Normally she would have moved, but she liked that he was there. He felt comfortable. She did not move away. Sex was common in this place, and yet, given the circumstances it rarely produced long-term pair bonds of more than a year. Cultural differences and expectations got in the way, and, given the small number of people in the village, it often made for uncomfortable liaisons.

She was telling him her idea that if they got people from the village together, they might maneuver an entire tree to lean against the cliff wall, giving them an advantage in anchoring their structure. He rested his hand on her thigh as he pointed to another tree with particularly large branches. She knew that, if she wanted to, they could make love right then and there. Even though he often talked of his wife, she knew it had been eight years since he'd last seen her. A long time by anyone's standard. She could feel that his breathing had gotten quicker. She couldn't do it. If this worked she would

see Jorge soon. She had to wait. She picked up his hand and moved it to the fallen log on which they sat. She did so calmly but firmly. He smiled and nodded respecting her choice. "Very sorry." He said. She patted him lightly on the shoulder, "You miss your wife very much."

"Very much. Yes. Long time. Yes. I think she not remember me."

She started to contradict him but said nothing. He was probably right. What had Jorge done? How long did he look for her? Had he given up? She would have been reported as a missing person. He was likely the main suspect. What had they done to him to try to get a confession? Such disappearances turn out often to be the spouse or boyfriend. He was the last person she saw. They had been together hiking when this happened. Did her parents blame him for losing her? Did they think he was capable of murdering her? It seemed hard to imagine. Her parents loved him. Even so, she had vanished a year ago.

They had been silent when she noticed the horrified look on his face staring at her; then she noticed that she was crying. She thought he must think his actions had brought the tears. "I miss my fiancé," she said and then grabbed him around the neck and hugged him. He patted her back and then hugged her tightly back. Finally, she pulled away and noticed he was crying too. "I miss my wife," he said simply. She nodded. She realized she did love Xhi. Not quite that way, yet, but he was a good friend. They spent the afternoon telling stories about their lives, such as they could with their language challenges. Still, working together, trying to build a ladder to those they loved best in the world united them. It was good to have people in her life like Xhi.

On the way home, she thought about how safe she felt here. If Xhi had come onto her back in her previous life it would have made her anxious and afraid. Here, when she had rebuffed Xhi's advances, she knew he would back off. She knew they were still friends. It was not that there was no danger in this place. She thought back to the man who had attacked the woman. Meg had pointed him out one day as he and some of the others like him passed by. He was a lumberjack from Siberia and looked intimidating. But he was empty now. He had no desire of any kind.

There was something about living as a community, likely all bound together for the rest of their lives, that brought a sense of familiar peace and

comfort. You got to know them. You knew they were different and strange to you, just as you were to them, but that meant you tried harder. You were more patient. With strangers you could be rude, you likely wouldn't see them again, but these people you would pass daily and meet again and again. It made for a sense of belonging and safety. She remembered how anxious she was before coming to this valley. There was always something to be afraid of: people, criminals, the "world," running out of money, not finding a job, tensions with neighbors, floods in faraway places, what to do with your life, what to make for dinner, whether she'd made her boss or boyfriend or best friend or siblings angry, wondering if you were paying attention to people you cared about, whether your car had enough gas, wondering if you had locked it, whether you were going to get whatever sickness was going around, who you had offended at church, if your parents were safe, and on and on.

Not here. Here there was one worry, the alien soul-sucking things that haunted the night. But they were manageable. They behaved the same all the time. You knew what they were going to do and where they would be and around what time you could expect them. You could keep yourself safe with a minimum of attention. So the days were simple and slow. The weather ranged only about fifteen degrees; there was no winter or summer—only fall and spring, and when it rained it was rather nice. No one got sick. Why did she want to go back? Why not let love blossom with Xhi for a time? Why not find contentment in the joys this place offered? It seemed so strange that she was driven to find a way out. Why? And strangely, the same thing was true of almost everyone she knew. Not a single person would not trade it all to get back to their life, despite its trouble.

As they got back to the village, a woman everyone called Auntie Loika, a woman from the South Pacific, pointed at them and said, loudly laughing, "What have you two been doing off in the woods all day?"

Xhi laughed and said, "Come with us. You see! I think you like."

The woman laughed and said, "Not with you old man. Maybe with her?"

Xhi's companion laughed, "Anytime, Auntie. I may have some surprises for you!"

They all laughed.

Auntie Loika came up and said, “They say you may have found a way out. Is it true?”

She looked at Xhi before answering and he nodded, so she told the woman, “Maybe. We have an idea. No guarantee of course but maybe.”

“Well you listen to me, you hear? You’ll be going nowhere without Auntie, you understand? No way. I’ve got a place on the first boat out of here. Deal?”

Xhi smiled and said sincerely, “Deal.”



The next day they held a memorial service for Kartari in the public house. Almost the whole village came, including the emptied. Her close friends gave reminiscences about her. Some who knew her well told stories about her previous life they had gathered from her through the years—her family, her son. A group of musicians formed a small ensemble and played some musical numbers they knew she liked. Her best friend stood up and talked about their friendship and how much she would miss her. It was strange, because Kartari was sitting in the back listening. Her face was blank as her best friend in the world remembered their relationship. In the end, many people were sobbing. Including all of the emptied. She whispered to Meg, “Why are they doing that?” Meg whispered back, “Ask one.”

After it was over she approached a hollow woman who had been in the back and bluntly asked, “Why did you cry during the service?”

She said, “It was expected. My ghost would have wanted me to.”

“Your ghost?”

“Yes. If I know my ghost would have done something, I do it. It was what was expected.”

“Did you feel sad?”

“Sad is a feeling. I have none.”

“You cried because . . .”

“Because everyone did, so we did. It was expected.”

“But you felt nothing.”

“No.”

"Do you remember feelings? Remember what it was like?"

"I remember I did feel, but the feeling itself went with my ghost."

"Are you happy?"

" . . . "



That night she could not sleep. She had been unnerved by the weeping emptied ones, but it was more than that; it was a kind of claustrophobia. Like her life had nowhere to go, nothing to reach for. This escape attempt had to be successful. It just had to be. In some ways, she was moving to the same hollowness as the emptied—not through the monsters that haunted the night, but by the slow dripping away of who she was and who she'd become. Her memories were slipping away, and the sense of forgetting was sliding toward the void. She tried to remember Jorge's face, the curve of his strong jaw, the double chin that gave his countenance a Puckish aspect, his brown eyes, his high forehead and premature receding hairline. But while she could catch glimpses of them individually, they would not cohere into a single vision of Jorge. She was losing him. She could not remember his face. Where was it going? How was this possible? As she lay there, she heard the clicking outside her window and got up to watch the soul-stealers pass. She opened the curtains and even opened the window to get a better look.

They came down the street slowly—twelve of them, their soft bulbous heads the size and shape of beachballs glowing of their own accord. They had one great eye, yellow irised, with a black hole in the center that seemed to hold a universe of nothingness in its depths. No eyelid, or hair of any sort, no ears, the papery covering appeared to house a hollow void. Their mouth was a slit that remained always closed. She wondered when it took away the spirits of its victims did it form a sucker shape like a lamprey's mouth? That seemed appropriate, like a science fiction B-movie. But in reality, there was nothing cartoonish about these things. They evoked horror and taint. A presence of utter disgrace, as if one sinned simply by looking at the things. A feeling that one willingly partook of shame and despair just by being in

their presence. As if a thousand unseen maggots were wriggling just on the periphery of your vision, striking naked fear down to the heartwood of your soul. You always know they are there waiting, even during the day, poisoning the edge of your being. But now with them so near, there was a fear that to look at them would somehow let them recognize you, causing them to move toward you and into you and give them possession of your spirit.

Nevertheless, the creatures' great eyes remain fixed ahead as they walked on scores of thin twiggy "legs," although legs does not do justice to the whisking clamor, the clicking and clacking, the creatures make. It was more like a tangle of roots connected by a network of intertwined mycelium. When it moved, these swirling sprigs and shoots conveyed it smoothly forward, as if each root tip were deciding for itself how best to move the swollen pumpkinlike head forward, creating a blur of motion that ended with the floating head moving along incomprehensible vectors, or maybe the legs could be described as a complex machine designed for stirring some evil concoction that required mixing in multiple dimensions. It was while staring at these she would often be wracked by a nameless fear that she had died and had come to a kind of hell. She turned away. She lay back down on her bed and started to cry. She just wanted Jorge. And suddenly he was there, popping into her mind's eye, looking for all the world just as she remembered him. She could see his face! She kept crying as she had earlier, but now her tears were of a different, more pleasant, order. She remembered his face.



Xhi met her at the edge of town on an old wooden bench that faced to the east. A group of people would gather at that end of town just before sunrise and welcome the dawn with tai chi practice. After, Xhi would sit on the bench and meditate until she arrived. She always made a lunch for them and brought full canteens for the day's work, although about noon they would refill them at the stream. It was a pleasant routine, and she liked the regularity and steadiness of it. He had volunteered to take over both duties, but she enjoyed it and insisted she be allowed to continue.

They walked to the base of the cliff in a cheerful mood. Today's goals were simple and straightforward, they had a good supply of linen they would twist into rope. Then they were going to chop down some more trees, section them, and try to frame a ladder of some kind from the poles and branches used for steps. On the way, they practiced Chinese and English by pointing at things, learning the words, and trying to frame them into sentences.

When they arrived, they were surprised to find one of the villagers waiting for them. It was a Ukrainian man named Myroslav. She knew him well because he was a fine storyteller, and she liked to listen to him. He had worked for years as an agricultural engineer in his previous life, but here he liked to fashion little marionettes and organized puppet plays for the village. He stood there with a big drawing notebook in his hands and a pencil kit laying at his feet.

"Hello Myroslav," Xhi said.

"Hello Xhi, your language of the English is more better and better."

Xhi smiled, thanking him with a nod.

She smiled and said hello and after acknowledging it, he answered with a bow.

"I listen to you in pub. I like your idea. I come to help."

"Excellent," she said, "Today we are cutting some more trees down and likely making more rope. We can use the help."

"I see rope?" he asked.

Xhi brought him over a piece about six meters long they had made the previous day and handed it to him. He took two stout staves that he seemed to have brought with him, each about a meter long, looped the rope, and tied the poles together. He placed one rod in the crook of a tree and then twisted the rope with the other. Tighter and tighter he twisted until the linen strips had become a great knot buckling and bunching where the twisting was most intense. He twisted harder and signaled Xhi over to help him twist it even further. Finally, between the two of them, the twisted rope began to fray until suddenly, with a crack, the rope snapped. Myroslav patted Xhi on the back saying, "Yes, Yes, I think this work. Da!" Then he picked up his notebook and sat under a tree and began to sketch something.

She looked at Xhi and shrugged, and they took their hatchets out of their packs and walked toward a tree they had designated yesterday for harvest today. It was a tall brown-barked pine with a trunk about the same diameter as a dinner plate. They took turns chopping, each about three minutes, then the other would take over for the next three. They went back and forth like this for about thirty minutes before they needed to rest. They looked over at Myroslav, sitting under a tree drawing. Apparently, when he said he wanted to help, he did not mean chopping trees down. They had gone through several cycles of work and rest for a couple of hours when finally, after chopping a wedge almost two-thirds of the way through the trunk, they felt the satisfaction of the tree starting to lean toward the wedge they had hacked out. It started creaking and cracking until, with one final loud snap, it broke from its thin mooring and quickly fell in a loud whoosh as it slammed to the ground. They gave a loud, "Harrah!" then shook each other's hands. Myroslav had hardly looked up. They decided to take a break and sat down on the tree they had just felled and ate some apple slices. Just as they finished, Myroslav approached them. He said nothing, but handed them his note pad. On it was a finely detailed sketch of something that looked like a stone-aged siege tower. Strong, frapped tree trunks were shown bound on each of the four corners by multiple ropes, secured to a framework of crisscrossing beams running through the center, where a ladder ran from top to bottom. The number of ropes was listed on the sides with their thickness in millimeters listed near the ropes. Many of the notes were in the Cyrillic alphabet; some were in English.

"You must make tower very sturdy. Bottom must hold many limbs on top. No?"

The other two looked up rather sheepishly, like children on a beach making a sand castle by filling a paper cup with wet sand from the swash just above wave break and then suddenly looking up to see that their neighbor has fashioned a sand dragon breathing fire and being charged by a sand knight on a sand horse. They just kept staring at the drawing of the architectural marvel and then back up to the Ukrainian.

"You see? Da? The rope bind just so much weight; I twist and think good idea of what we need. Maybe I test more. So we must increase strength to

hold? Also, important we use drier wood at top. Much lighter. Very good to scale cliff.”

“I think we need help,” Xhi said.

She nodded, “Lots.”



They got it. A few sections of her journal of the next few days describes it.

Jorge! Ten people showed up this morning. Myroslav showed us what to cut, and by the end of the day we had four huge logs forming the base of the tower (I nicknamed it Babel and it's stuck). The Ukrainian is a perfectionist, and he inspected the ropes we made, the frapping we did to bind the logs into the square base, and every aspect of our tower. But it was so fun. All of us working. Working to get out. Maybe I'll see you in a month or so? I wish you could see me. I'm smiling from ear to ear.

<three days later>

Jorge! There were more than 50 people there today. The word of our task is spreading, and more and more people want to help. I'm so tired. We got up to about a meter and a half today.

< seven days later>

70 people. Some of them tore down an unoccupied house, and we got some serious lumber—good dry wood. Myroslav's done a redesign, so we are building a stairway up the center instead of a ladder. Very fancy! We made it to 5 meters. Xhi and I would have died without Myroslav's design.

<two days>

Myroslav was furious. Tore it down to 3 meters to fix some sloppy rope work.

<three days>

8 meters! I'm exhausted.

<next day>

8 meters still. Myroslav made us spend some time shoring up the sides of the tower with some large trees. We dug trenches and got the tower leaning

tightly against the cliff face for stability. Jorge, can you feel I'll be there soon? Don't give up.

<one week later>

12 meters.

<two days later>

12.5 meters. More excitement more stresses. Fight almost broke out among those twisting rope. Tension's high.

<three days>

17 meters.

<three days later>

22 meters.

<two weeks later>

We are three meters from the top.

<next day>

Thunderstorm. Nice to rest. I thought about you while Meg and I talked about what we are going to do when we get back. She misses her son so much. She's sure her husband will have moved on, but she really just wants to be back in her son's life. He'll be about twelve now. She wonders what he'll be like. I talked about you. How beautiful you were. How kind. How generous. I'm afraid she thinks I'm marrying one of the Saints, ha ha and I guess I am! I love you Jorge. Can you hear me say that? Do you know what you mean to me? It's been over a year. I've missed you every hour of every day. See you soon.

<four days later>

Done. Babel is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Everyone is at the pub raising toasts to Myroslav and Xhi. I'm content to spend this time with you. Tomorrow we climb the mountain to the pass. We were going to send a small group up to the saddle, but everyone wants to go. All I know is Xhi and I are going. I don't know where we are, so it might take a few days to hike to civilization. As soon as I find a phone I'll call. I can't sleep or eat. I'm coming home.

<next day>

It rained the day before we were to leave and didn't let up until nearly 6 a.m. However, when the dawn peeked over the surrounding mountains the clouds, though dark, were pulling apart and letting the sun rays through. The world sparkled from the early morning rain and the trees and meadow grass seemed to have been arrayed in their finest dress. The feeling in the air was cool and inviting, rich with pine terpenes and the smell of grass and wildflowers. It seemed as if the valley were trying to coax us into staying. Are you sure you want to leave this beautiful place? It whispered. Haven't I cared for you? Seen to your every whim? Here. Look around. How can you leave this? But we were, and nothing in the world could dissuade us from our journey. Nothing.

Given the logistics, the plan was today forty of us were going to cross over the pass and continue searching for help and rescue from the valley. While we were building the tower, a large group of villagers helped the escape efforts by creating supplies for our journey, sleeping bags from blankets, hardier shoes by modifying our old ones and lining them with cotton and torn up wool blankets and other materials, backpacks to carry enough provisions for a long hike to civilization. They had only enough for the forty going first, but they thought in another two weeks they could outfit a second forty to follow on our heels if we hadn't reported back in that time or sent rescue. But everyone I talked to fully expected helicopters to be arriving an hour after we crossed over the pass. I was more cautious and thought it might be a journey of several weeks. Hard weeks. But it didn't matter. We were going to succeed. We knew it.

It was a merry parade to the tower. The forty going over the top were decked out in their packs and heavy weather gear (why not, we had to get used to carrying it). When we arrived, a few people opened up some jars of juice and poured it on the ground before the tower. A libation to whatever gods might be allies in our effort. A few people offered blessings and prayers; some read poetry. I could not pay attention to any of it though. I just wanted to get started. The night before, the three other members of our little LDS congregation came over to wish me well. Our Belgian Elder gave me a blessing. He promised I would be watched over. He spoke of the Lord being aware of our situation and that things would get better. But as I said, there was a feeling of abandonment that has attended me since I got here. I've never had a sense

that God knew we were here. There was an impenetrable shield that blocked our heavenly parents, or so it seemed from the beginning.

Finally, Xhi, Myroslav, and I were given pride of place to lead up the expedition, and we started up the tower. The forty followed, then about fifty more. They were going to go with us to the saddle and survey the world beyond but would return to the village to report on what they saw. The tower had six “floors,” roughhewn platforms with plank “stairs” between the levels until it opened onto a platform at the top of the cliff with a short ramp connecting the tower to the top. I thought about how much work this had taken to build, and I felt a deep sense of gratitude it had been spawned by my and Xhi’s silly plan to build a big ladder. This was an amazing piece of engineering designed by Myroslav and helped along by people from all over the world working together, bringing their insights and ideas. It was the village that did this. Nothing less. The whole village.

We waited at the top of the cliff for all of the nearly hundred people that were going up to the saddle. We led off in good spirits, but soon the way got rough. We were mostly hiking up a steep forested slope with many fallen trees, scrub, and occasional rock slides that had to be traversed. The group spread out, thinned, and formed into something like a knotted quarter-mile line. I fell in with Meg, who was not going with us past the saddle, but I was grateful for her presence. We talked a while about the first thing we would do after reuniting with our families. Mine was see a movie, something romantic and fun. Meg wanted to go for a long walk along the beach near where she lived with a brand-new Australian shepherd and a bag of peanut butter sandwiches. A group of Indian men who had started a runners’ club took a strong lead. Despite not one of us exercising regularly while here, something about the place had not only ensured we never got sick but allowed us to maintain a high level of fitness. However, the running club was in amazing shape and quickly left us behind.

The way up after the timberline was very steep, with a low heath that did not allow very secure footing. The mountains on either side of us were filled with sheer cliffs, glaciers, and ice walls giving us a sense of how small we were. And so helpless to go in any other direction but the one we were heading. The climbing was not easy because the dirt underfoot yielded too easily, and it seemed like you slipped back two steps for every one forward. Not really of course, but that’s what it seemed like. It reminded me of backpacking in the Rockies with my family when I was little. But I saw no pika, as were so

abundant then. Animals did not live in the valley. I'm not sure why. No fish in the river. No birds ever visited. We grew used to this, but it was not until I noticed the lack of pika that it struck me how very odd this place was. Was the valley so isolated that after the Pleistocene glaciers retreated nothing could find its way here? It gave me a moment of panic that we might have a much longer hike than we were ready for.

Finally, we left all vegetation behind and climbed up a rocky slag, sometimes going on hands and legs. As we approached the saddle, the ground began to level, and we could see the runners, their backs to us, kneeling facing the other side of this range. Our excitement mounted as we anticipated seeing the other side of this land in which we for so long had been held captive.

I have seen anguish a few times in my life, but its exemplar will always be the look of the young Indian man's face when he turned to look at us. Such despair. Sorrow. Pain. His face was stretched in a grimace of agony such as might be depicted in a painting of Dante's Inferno. Tears streamed down his face. He did not try to speak but just stared at us as we closed the distance to the top of the saddle. Then we saw it. A great bowl-shaped cirque cut the saddle in half with both mountains framing the saddle with sheer and foreboding cliffs. We were looking at an 800 meter drop straight down about 10 meters from the saddle's col. It was as if one of the old gods had taken a giant ice cream scoop and gouged a scoop out of both the mountains and the saddle. There was no way out of our valley. I fell on the ground and cried and cried and cried, because, my dear Jorge, I knew then that I would never see you again in this life.



The village went into mourning. Meg locked herself in her room. She could hear her roommate weeping, but there was nothing she could do. Twice more she climbed to the cirque to ensure they had not missed something, that there was not some hidden way down lurking somewhere to the side. There was not. After that, she too gave in to despair and let it take her full. She stopped sleeping, eating, taking care of herself. She just wanted to go away. Or join the emptied. Two villagers did. Two women from China, both part of the forty who were going to try to hike to find help. Three weeks after the fiasco

on the saddle they just walked out at night together and sat on the street until the beasts came and carried away their souls. In the morning they got up and walked to the house at the end of the street and took up their lives with the emptied.

It shook the village that two people had accepted the touch of the monsters. People started talking again about what had happened. People gathered and hugged each other, scolded those who refused to see that nothing had changed and that it was time to move on. "A hope was stolen they never had a right to embrace. It was as it had always been." There was some anger at those who had concocted the whole adventure. In a public meeting, she and Xhi apologized and asked their neighbors' forgiveness. It was granted. In about three months, most had put it behind them. Things in the village took back the shape that had been their way of life for a very long time.



One day after having some porridge with Meg, she decided to hike out to the tower. Those days with Xhi had been magical. The sense of purpose. The joy of laboring in the forest among the trees, flowers, and grasses. She just wanted to think. On the way up she was surprised to find Xhi coming down. They had not spoken since the night they had apologized together to the village. He was glad to see her too. He had gone up to retrieve some tools that he had made to assist the work.

"Those were good days," she said.

"Very good days," he answered. "I miss our many talks and learning English."

She laughed. "Yes. Perhaps we should begin a new project together.

"I like very much. Like me to go with you back up?"

"Not today. I want to think. But maybe in a couple of days."

"A couple of days. Yes very good. We do that. Thank you."

"Thank you, Xhi."

They embraced warmly and went their separate ways.



Jackie Leishman
Yosemite 21
monotype, charcoal, paint, and collage.
42 x 30 inches

There were no clouds in the dome of blue that rose above the mountains, the color shading darker as it rose away from the low morning sun only a little over the tops of mountains. She crossed a small bridge and peered over the edge at the scattered rocks just below the surface of the water. Reeds and willows marked the edge of the stream from where it ran through a meadow to where it disappeared into the pines. She was not thinking. She was listening to her breath as she'd been shown to do in a meditation class taught by a man named Chitranjan. She had been attending only occasionally, but she had not been since the disaster on the saddle. She didn't want to think about anything. Not Jorge. Not the home she would never see again. Not her parents, brothers, and sisters. Not her friends. Not even her Australian Shepherd Molly. She didn't want to think about the food she would miss. The school she would never graduate from. She did not want to think about the books she would never read. The movies she would never see. The music she would never hear. The dances she would never attend. She did not want to think about the trips she would never take to places in the world she would never see.

The tower was still there. It stood a monument to their . . . her folly. Babel. It was well named. It had scrambled her dreams of the future so thoroughly that she did not understand how hope could ever speak to her again. She walked over to the small stream that ran near the site and where she and Xhi had eaten so many lunches together as they discussed a future that would never be realized. She took off her shoes and rested her feet in the cold water. It felt good. She stood up and turned over some of the smooth stones resting on the bottom of the brook. Her father, an avid fly fisherman, had taught her how to look for mayfly, stonefly, and caddisfly larvae. There were none. Just like the pika, there were no animals in this valley. That had seemed accidental once, but now it seemed malicious. It was like living in some kind of aquarium, she realized. Were they being watched? Were some alter-dimensional children tapping on the sky above trying to get her to move?

She climbed up the tower and hiked up to the saddle again, this time not to look down but to look out over the mountains. Did they ever end beyond the horizon? Was it possible they went on forever? She was up to the saddle by noon and took a long drink from one of the abundant canteens people

had left when they returned from their failed expedition. She looked out over the cirque to the mountains. The peaks that stretched into the distance were endless as far as she could see, like a child's drawing of cone mountains shrinking into the distance until they became too small to draw and ended as pointy dots. She looked down; there was a small lake at the bottom of the bowl. She wondered if there were fish in the lake, since it wasn't in their animal-forsaken valley.

It took her only a couple of hours to get back to the tower and climb down to the valley floor. She still had some nuts and dried fruit in her backpack, so she sat with her back against a rock and ate a small meal. She drank from the stream and laid down on the grass and looked up at the sky through a couple of tall trees that stretched high in a circle above her. She wondered again if she were being watched.

When she opened her eyes, she was surprised to see stars. Had she left her curtain open again? Then it hit her—it was night. And she was outside of the village. She sat up and looked around. She did not see the creatures. She turned her attention back to the stars and tried to scry out the time. There was Vishnu's eye near the horizon and the golden arches high near the polar star; it was after midnight, but not as late as 2am. She began to shake. By force of will, she stopped and listened carefully for the sound of the monsters. Nothing. She looked carefully around trying not to make a sound but could not see anything in motion. If she could just lay low until dawn she would be fine. But she had never heard of anyone surviving a night outside. Then it struck her. The tower. Could the beasts climb it? It couldn't get up the stairs, she was sure, their heads would not fit through the opening of each floor where the flight of stairs leading to the next landing ended. Quietly, quietly she crept to the tower. She took off her shoes and began the slow ascent up the tower. She moved very slowly, very quietly, barely breathing. Each hand on the wood of the tower sounded like an explosion to her ears, and she would freeze and listen for the sound of clicking and clacking. Nothing. She climbed carefully up the hill and got behind a tree and sat to wait until the sun rose into the valley. Meg must be terrified she had not come home. She would hope her dear roommate had gone home with some lover, but

she would know in her heart she would not have done that. Meg would be worried sick. She did not even tell her that she was going to the tower. The silence was absolute. There was no wind. No moon. She wanted to look out over the valley and see if she could see the creatures, but she knew anything she did to see them would allow them to see her—and who knew what their capacities for seeing were like. Maybe they were moles, or maybe they were eagles. She would just sit. Wait until light.

She looked up the slope of the mountain adjacent to her. A glacier climbed up its side to where it joined the slope she was sitting on that ran up to the top of the saddle. And there they were. The bulbous headed fiends were clicking and whooshing down the glacier at the speed of a cheetah. It took only seven seconds for them to reach her. Her last thoughts were: (1) would her dog Molley have been able to drive them off? (2) relief that it was over; (3) that she should have let Xhi make love to her; and (4) would being emptied hurt?



Caesura

She could not be spinning. There was no sense of centripetal force. Nor so much as a waft of wind blowing past to suggest she was falling through the air. No feeling of bodily proprioception—were her legs below her? Her arm—where was it? Yet she knew it was there, she could discern it but not feel it. Her body was a growing catalog of contradictions. She was not senseless, she could see colors—in patches, lines, oblongs, blotches, geometric shapes, forms, poofs and splotches, wobbles and splashes, mosaics, smears of lazy flecks of stippling careening namby-pamby over ticklish solids in ways that should have made her dizzy, for all was in motion. Rivers of colors, some on and some off the spectrum reflected in the hues of the rainbow and beyond and swooped back down into the depths of whatever this was.

But then she knew what it was, not through some chain of logic and accumulation of empirical evidence, but as if it had been added to her set

of mental categories—it was the past. All of it. All these things hurricaning around her were the simultaneity of the four dimensions of her existence so far. That roving tangle of green could be her bike, not an object in space, but a bicycle in space and time. She smiled as the thought passed through her mind. Who would have guessed when your life passed right before your eyes you would not have a hint of what you were seeing? Yet because she had no perceptual apparatus to parse it into temporal slices, she could not pull a single event from the background of chaos. To give it meaning, she knew she would need to apprehend it in just three dimensions. If she could just slice it up right, she could grasp the object-laden nature of lesser dimensions in the thickness of this one, and she could find a way out. If she understood how, she could take the multidimensions through which she traveled and condense the well-stirred mess just enough to do a razor-thin Dedekind cut on this reality, then she could recreate the present of her earthly sojourn.

How she knew this she did not understand, but it seemed part and parcel of what she'd been cognitively handed as she twirled in this strange place. She thought how if she had experienced this kind of moving-colors-passage in her life she would be dizzy and seasick, but there was no feeling of motion, only passage and flow. What kind of thing am I? She wondered. A spirit? A soul? An Intelligence? Perhaps a mere notion in the passing dream of a God, as her friend Sonali—who had lived two doors down from Meg's and her place—believed. Meg! Sonali! It was coming back. She had not ceased to exist! That was something; whatever she was, she was alive! The colors began to focus into a cone, the point of which seemed to be gathering together and shrinking the visual field of colors—outside of which was a vast field of grey emptiness now lining the sides of the horizon where the colors melted away and focused her progress toward the sharp point of a cone. Then, as she hit the point at the end of the cone, the void gathered around her; she popped out into what she felt sure was Hell.

She was in a tunnel with smooth blue walls the color of a dark sea, with rounded ceilings and a flat floor—as if a tube had been cut level along the bottom so she could walk. The tunnel was about as wide and high as an aspen. There were people everywhere. She asked someone where she was, but

the other person did not stop—she just looked at her and motioned in the direction everyone seemed to be heading along the broad pathway. She tried to talk to those around her, and while they turned their eyes her direction, they would only turn away and continue their march.

To her surprise, she was not afraid. She was also surprised they were all walking instead of floating, as she supposed spirits would. She noticed that she could feel the passage of air, the ground under her feet, the sounds of the people moving. She touched her face and could feel her skin, the shape of her nose. She ran her finger along her lips and felt the same slight tickle she always felt when she'd done that on Earth. She tried again to talk to a man walking near her, and he glanced at her and gestured forward. The entire congregation was naked, but it seemed natural and unremarkable, as if the old shame and taboos had been lifted out of her. She could see an opening ahead and soon she walked into a vast cavern. It was as massive as a city. Unlike a city, however, there were no structures.

As they entered, the people spread out and began chattering quietly. The man who had walked beside her turned to her and said, "I perceive you are new. We can talk now; in the tunnels we have a tradition to hold our tongues still."

She noticed his voice was not moving with his mouth, like the old Japanese Godzilla movies she watched as a kid. She intuited that he was speaking in a different language, but she was hearing it in English. She nodded and asked, "Where are we?"

He smiled, a very human and reassuring gesture. He said, "It is where we wait."

"The spirit world?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "Like that. It has many names, but that's not a bad one."

"What are we doing?" she asked. She was calm but confused.

He looked at her and said softly, "We are here for you. And the other arrivals. We are from valleys many and far-flung. We will listen to the voice of The Mendicant Instructor. Then we will separate again into our valleys and return to our section of this place and think about what was said."

"And wait? For what?" she said. "And wait," he answered.

The room was massive, several miles across perhaps, and the floor curved upward as if the bottom of a great bowl so one could see the crowd of spirits gathered on the other side of the concave area. Strange the way that all those gathered here were spirits; it came to her, for there was nothing in their appearance that would have given them away as such. She looked at the multitude of people and for the first time was frightened by the immensity of the crowd. At the center of the bowl she noticed a large platform, like a raised dais several meters high. On it stood an old man. He seemed shabby and out of place. He dressed in rags hanging loosely and unkempt from his shoulders and tied around his waist with a rope. He was not naked like the masses milling in the cavern. He stood and spoke. His voice carried easily over the assembled spirits. A hush fell over the crowd, and she sensed that her growing fear was shared by the others.

“Welcome newcomers. Be afraid, for you will hear terrors. I will tell the story of the death of Zhawa.”

She, following the examples of the others, got on her knees. Every ghost of that multitude started humming and swaying until, from every tongue, from every person came a song. Not the same song. Not the same words nor the same score. From no two spirits did the song that issued forth express exactly the same thing, either in the notes or the lyrics. Each sang different words, to a different strain, yet the chords sprang together, twisting and knotting as one into a single song that bubbled from the throng as if a heavenly choir were singing a single piece. She sang her part. She sang a song she had never heard before, as an individual, to a score that only she was singing. Alone. The words came to her from nowhere and everywhere, and it seemed it was true for each soul of that place. Each voice combined with the others to create a new libretto for a new aria for the assembly as a whole, as if making only a single voice. One song. From millions of different voices.

When it was over the old shabby man stood. “Again. You have sung as one the New Song. The song of Zhawa. And despite your poor performance, nevertheless we honor him.”



Jackie Leishman
Yosemite 32
printmaking ink, paint, pastel, and collage
24 x 18 inches

A great cheer arose. And she with them. She had heard the song. She had learned of the death of Zhawa. The oldest child of the high God and Goddess, Elal and Shkna.

And yet. There was something wrong. The aria had not been finished. She knew this. Yes, the god Zhawa had died. Fully. Not just in body, but in spirit. Yet something seemed incomplete. There were things left hanging. Threads of the refrain unresolved. She wanted to ask, but the man in rags began to speak, and a hush fell again over the crowd.

“Find your valley mates you silly and sad spirits. Return to your small caverns and rejoice until we meet again and sing the new song. Perhaps you will do better next time.” And then he was gone. Just like that. He vanished.

She looked around, everyone was in motion, forming clusters, she felt drawn to one in particular on the other side of the bowl, and as she approached one of the women shouted her name, and as she turned, she returned the shout in delight, “Kartari! Is it you?” They ran together and embraced. It was the biggest surprise of the evening. She could feel Kartari’s arms around her, her breasts pressing against her own, and her spirit body was filled with the warmth of the living.

“I was looking for you!” Kartari said.

She was surprised. “How did you know I’d died?”

“We saw it. Come I’ll show you.”

She followed the group of spirits from her valley down many long twisting corridors through the silent tunnels until they came to a smaller cavern about the size of an airplane hangar back on Earth with hundreds of small tunnels emanating from its hub.

“Kartari, what do we do here? Do we eat or sleep?”

“No,” Kartari said. “We watch and wait. We talk mostly about the past and our lives before coming here, or we try to imagine what life will be like when we leave.”

“It sounds boring,” she said.

“No,” Kartari said, “Without our bodies, that frustration at waiting seems low key. Come let me show you something.” Kartari took her hand and led

her to one of the tunnels that seemed to branch from the main chamber. They walked in a few feet and were met by a shimmering wall of red. Like a sheer curtain that disclosed everything outside when one looked out the window. She was looking into the public house back in the Valley. There were many people she knew well, playing cards or having a cup of tea or just talking.

She turned to Kartari, "What is this place?" Her friend smiled,

"Each of the tunnels that lead from our cavern end in a window to the valley. I watched you and Xhi and the others build the tower to escape." She looked down, "We so wanted you to return to earth. So wanted you to be free. That's how we saw you die. We saw Meg bawling in the pub because you had not come home, so we looked through the windows until we found you asleep under the stars. We knew you would be killed."

They watched for a long time until she took Kartari's hand and pulled her back to the cavern. "Would you mind if I explored others of these windows?"

"Of course not. Please, there is really nothing else to do."



For the next few weeks, she watched her friends. She watched Xhi. He had climbed twice up to the pass that had led them all into such despair, and he sat on the edge staring out over the peaks that slid into the vanishing point of the distant horizon. He cried often. She knew it was because she had been emptied. The rest of the time he wandered the valley.

Meg, too, was inconsolable. She wept on her bed. The loss of hope for an escape, the loss of her roommate and friend, had left her broken. She wanted to reach out to her and comfort her, but she could not. She was far away.

She also found her own physical body. She watched it cooking a breakfast of eggs and bacon. It took the prepared food to the wooden table and ate. It clearly took no enjoyment from the meal. It did not show any signs of pleasure. When the meal was over, it sat down on a stiff wooden chair and focused her roving eye on nothing in particular. Until there was something else that needed to be done to care for the body, or fulfill someone's request

for help, she did not get up. Oh how she longed to be back in there! What a waste of a body. She longed to taste the bacon and eggs, drink a glass of orange juice, taste fresh pineapple. Couldn't she ever again feel her arms and legs moving through the world? She just ached to be brought back into the world. To Earth, or even the Valley. In the plainness of this second place, life had so little to recommend it. Nor did it seem bad, as if her intolerance for boredom had been anesthetized. But nothing changed about wanting her body back. She so much wanted it back.



One day passed much as the last. After what must have been several months, although it was hard to tell, she was sitting at the end of one of the tunnels, as she often did, watching through the red shimmer the people of the village. Right now, Xhi and Meg were recalling some of the times they had shared with her before she had been emptied. It was so touching to see her friends express such intimate things about how much they cared about her and loved her. It was bittersweet, because their conversation helped her realize how much she loved these two old friends. It had been weeks since she had thought about Jorge. But these two? They were constantly on her mind. She wanted to take them into her arms and tell them she loved them.

"You love them?"

She was surprised to see the ragged mendicant sitting on the floor near the screen. She had not seen him since her arrival. She did not hear his approach, maybe because he just appeared—she knew nothing of what could be done or not done here. But there he was, clothed in rags, a nauseous smell coming from this dirty and unwashed body. She wondered if it were the real thing—a genuine physical body like she used to have. "Yes of course. I love them dearly."

He declared loudly, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

"The Gospel of John, quoting the Savior, I think," she said.

"Who?"

“Jesus . . . Never mind.”

“Follow me. I want to show you something. You are sort of thick. I’ll show you something useful. Give you a bit of wisdom that you sorely lack.”

They walked out of the tunnel, and then from the main cavern took another. One low to the ground they had to crawl into. She’d been in it before. At the end, the view was from a meadow to a rock wall climbing above the valley. It was not one that many spirits visited, because people from the valley did not come to this area often, and there was really nothing to see. He brought her to the end where, of course, there was a shimmering red window at the end, like all the tunnels here.

They reached the place, and the mendicant said, “Look.”

She did and said, “I see the cliff wall near the waterfall. I know the place.”

“Look closer. What do you see?”

“I see the grass against the cliff. I see a pine nearby, some of its branches trying to find their way around the cliff growing up along its face. I see the shimmer of this mirror lightly reflected against the granite wall . . .”

“Look closely.”

She did. And she realized the faint shimmer was not a reflection. She could see shapes moving within the shimmer.

“That is not a reflection of this window,” she said matter of factually. “What is it?”

Then she saw it. It resolved suddenly with great clarity. Not because of any change in the image itself, but because she focused her eyes differently, and she saw it. It was a city street. A busy city street and people were walking by. New York? Paris? Beijing? She could not tell. But she could tell it was Earth.

“It’s home,” she said in a whisper.

“Yes. Anyone can walk through it.”

“It’s not visible to those in the Valley. I know it. I’ve been to this place. Many times.”

“You never touched the rock?”

“No. Why would I?”

“Yes, why would you. Thus no one ever escapes even though it is easy.”

"This makes a mockery of our lives," she said. "To spring on us that we could have escaped if we just would have touched a certain rock, which we never would have, seems the ultimate cruelty. Did you bring me here to taunt me? To tell me I just had to tap my ruby slippers three times and I could have been whisked home? You are nothing but a monster."

"Perhaps. I suppose someone who has seen it from this place could tell them."

"Is that possible? Tell me. Tell me how? Tell me now!"

"Greater love hath no woman than this, that a woman lay down her life for her friends," he mocked.

She reached out to touch the red screen. She knew what it would feel like. She'd touched hundreds of them. They were warm, glassy, slightly vibrating, and completely impenetrable.

She moved to go through.

"Don't touch it, you dim girl. The field will collapse, and everyone will be free to return to their emptied bodies. But not you. You will evaporate. Your shade will anyway. Don't touch it. Or do, everyone would be happy if you did. You'd be dead though. Gone. Forever. You will go through, but when you try to leave the field you will vanish from existence. Forever. Poof. You will dissolve. Your spirit will be utterly and completely destroyed. Your existence will be over. It is an eternal nonexistence."

She backed away. "I thought you could not die as a spirit?"

He smirked. "Why would you think that?"



Later that week, they were summoned to sing so several newly arrived spirits could sing the strange and lovely New Song. When they got back, she told a few of her company what the mendicant had said. They all knew. They'd all been told by the same person sometime in the past. That is why few went there. All were frightened they might accidentally fall in.

She spent a lot of time there. Watching the people in the fog of the cliff-face scene from some earthly city. The rest of the time she spent watching Meg and Xhi. They had become friends, and after a few more months lovers—apparently drawn together through her death. She was not jealous, not here, but she longed for them and loved them and wished she could see them again and hold their hands and enjoy the pleasures of good conversations and sharing a meal and just being together. Just being together. She loved them. It was that.

One day she found Meg crying. Xhi had his arm around her. His eyes were moist too. Meg was talking about a time she had taken her son to the London Zoo. There was a new exhibit of Koala bears, and her son had been in rapture over the little marsupials. Meg wondered if anyone had taken him to the zoo since. Or if anyone cared about him at all. What was he doing? Was he loved? She was sure her husband would have remarried. Who was the stranger caring for him now? Or did her ex give their son to Meg's own mother to raise? She couldn't bear not knowing anymore. Meg wept. Xhi wept. She wept. Who had done this to them? No God worth worshiping could have done it. Of that she was sure.

The next day as she was sitting before the shimmering door where the scene from earth could be discerned, when the mendicant reappeared. He looked down at her.

"Why do you sit here? You look stupid."

"No reason. I like knowing the place I came from existed."

"The god Zhawa often sat looking at his world too. I thought he looked stupid too. He was the son of god and died to save his universe."

"Like Jesus?"

"You've mentioned him before."

"In my world, he died to save his people too."

"Happens a lot, I'll be bound."

"He was resurrected after three days."

"You mean his spirit was returned to his body after three days? What kind of sacrifice is that? Three days of being dead? That's like saying you are giving up your house for some great cause and then repossessing it after a weekend away."

"It's not like that. He suffered for our sins."

"Ohhh. Suffered for your sins did he?"

"Do not mock it."

"I'm not. I just don't know what that means."

"A lot. It means a lot."

"I'm sure. But Zhawa! Now there was a proper god's son. When he died for us, his spirit was destroyed. Consumed. Forever. His was an eternal sacrifice. Zhawa was emptied permanently. Never to feel a thing ever again. His sacrifice was infinite and eternal. His body became an icon! We pray before it and to it. A living icon. On his left sits the great father, on the right his heavenly mother. They remember him. And what he did. They ask us to remember him. We remember him in word and action. We remember him in ritual meals. He gave up his life for his friends. We call upon our great heavenly parents now in his name, Zhawa! He that will ever be remembered."

She sat silently watching, then turned to the mendicant. "So if I walked through this barrier would drop and everyone could go back to their bodies. Except me."

"Not everyone. Just the people from your valley."

"And would they remember their time here?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't they?"

"I don't know. All the stupid rules seem rather arbitrary to me as it is."

"Don't be blasphemous girl!"

"I'm sorry. But they could tell the others how to get back to our world? To Earth?"

"I'm sure, girl, it would be a stampede to go through the other door to your, what do you call it? Earth."

"So Meg could see her son. And Xhi his wife. Can you tell me if her son will remember him or if Xhi's wife will have waited all these years?"

"I assure you I know nothing of your world. Maybe they did. Maybe they didn't. I can't answer these kinds of questions. I serve Zhawa."

"So, I could do what Zhawa did?"

"Don't be absurd. You really are slow. He saved a universe. Billions of people. You'll be saving a valley? What? Three maybe four hundred? Don't let it go to your head. That is not comparable."

He paused for a time and looked at her eyes as if trying to see something, then said, “Even so, Greater love hath no woman than this: that a woman lay down her life for her friends.”



She watched Xhi and Meg for the next two days. She watched them climb to the saddle again. She watched them swim in a slow part of the river. She watched them weep and hold each other and curse their lot that they would never see their loved ones again. And she wept with them, because she loved them. With all her heart.

She returned to the door that would set them free. All of them. She did not want to give up existence. She wanted to see Jorge again. But she could not live like this. It had to end. But mostly she just wanted Xhi and Meg to have a chance at a happy life—not just living day to day in an endless repeat of a sham existence. She wanted them to have faith and hope in a future. She wanted them to build something that would endure. She wanted them to fulfill dreams. She wept at the injustice of the world that demanded such things. But love. It endured. Even if it meant she would not.



She found Kartari watching a badminton game through one of the other doors that looked over one of the fields in the valley.

“Kartari, come with me a moment, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

She was silent as she led her to the door, “Look, do you see the door on the cliff wall?”

“Yes. The one to Earth?”

“Yes.”

“Will you gather everyone? Tell them this barrier will be down. Tell them to return to their bodies. Tell them to go through the door opposite. Go back to Earth.”

“How? You can’t open it. You’ll die. We all know that. It will be the end!”

“Go! Please hurry. Please just go get them. And Kartari, when you get to the other side, will you do something for me?”

“I’ll do anything.”

“Tell Xhi and Meg how much they meant to me. Tell them I loved them dearly.”

“I will.”

“Go.”

Kartari took off, shouting at the top of her spirit lungs.

The red door was glimmering before her bright with promise, tears ran down her cheeks as she reached out her hand and opened something locked and secured, but vulnerable to certain sacrifices.



Kenoses

The old woman lived in the valley by herself. In the morning she would light a fire in the fireplace of the empty house. Then, after waiting for the proper amount of time to pass, she would walk to the mercantile to get fresh eggs, bread and butter, and some onions. She needed to eat and so would cook a simple meal. Then, to keep her body healthy and strong, she would walk for three hours to the waterfall at the end of the valley and then turn around and walk back to the village. She saw nothing of its beauty. Nor did she long for company. Once every seven days, she would go to the old meeting room and sing a hymn and offer a prayer and then read from the Spanish Book of Mormon, which she kept on top of the piano. There was no one to translate for, but it did not matter because she did not do it to teach or learn, nor to find meaning or gain insight. After, she would offer a closing prayer, walk to the mercantile and pick up an apple pie, a pork chop, a potato, some carrots, and using the butter from breakfast she would fry all but the pie together in the kitchen and eat them. She would then eat the pie. After this, she would sit on the porch and watch the sun set over the mountains. She would sit there until the old clock, which she wound each day, struck 10 p.m. Then she would

ready herself for bed and sleep until the alarm went off at 6 a.m. She would repeat this each day as she had for many years. She did not look for reasons, but if you should ask her, she would say she did these things because that is what bodies do. They need exercise, food, and sleep. And it is what her ghost would want her to do.



One day she met a man standing on the road to the waterfall. He was short. Dark skinned. With brown eyes.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello,” he answered.

“I am walking to stay in good health,” she said.

He nodded. “I do the will of my parents. And do nothing save they tell me to do it.”

“Are you exercising?”

“I will walk with you as they asked.”

“You are most welcome to join me,” she said.

“My name is Zhawa.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I am called Sophia.”

“Sophia. The pleasure is mine.”

In silence they continued down the road. The sun was rising high in the sky bathing the face of the eastern-facing mountains in light, igniting the snow-covered peaks in a pale pink glow. A light wind was playing softly among the pines and the babble of the stream sounded cold and clear through the trees. The rhythm of their footfalls rose from the dirt road and the world was full of green things growing abundantly in brightness and light all round them. When they reached the waterfall, they watched for a time, and perhaps knowing that bodies at times needed to converse, they waited for the other to make a request or issue a command. But neither spoke and so in silence they watched and listened as frigid snowmelt poured over the edge of the world.