

All That We Have (ca. 1973)

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-- and then I stood on a black, featureless plateau with no idea where I was or where I had been. I could dredge up no memory of my past. Yet I knew things. Someone had once said “I think therefore I am”, I don’t know who though I must have at one time. But how can one have knowledge without memory?

The plain extended unbroken in all directions, the stone as smooth as glass. Its surface was pitted with small, symmetrical craters. In each depression rested an oblate spheroid that might have been an ordinary pebble if not for its perfect geometry. There seemed to be nothing to break the flat monotony. No sun marred the dark blue sky. Then, far on the horizon, I spotted a short hairline crack in the ultramarine. It might have been a kilometer or ten thousand distant; there was no way of knowing without perspective. This was not Earth and I sensed that terrestrial assumptions did not apply here.

I began walking toward it. It was the only other thing in this place that violated the monotony, and that was enough to give it significance. Perhaps it could give me answers.

I walked for hours. The slender spur grew no larger, drew no closer. Though my muscles ached and my throat was parched, I trod on, the desire to reach the anomaly pressing me forward.

Is this hell? I began to wonder. Am I dead and this my final judgment? Is damnation nothing more or less than interminable boredom?

Twilight came darkening the sky. Soon all was blackness. Not even stars shwon. As I lay on the adamant surface, I wished for an end to my thirst even as I realized that, if it were quenched, hunger would gnaw at me. And if hunger satisfied, my sore muscles would complain about their aches. And if they too were silenced, I would still be left with the unanswerable enigma of this place and my solitude in it.

Light without sun returned to the plain. I wondered about where the lumination came from. The sky seemed no brighter than the ground so it could not be the source. That suggested it came from somewhere else – but there were no shadows to indicate where that might be.

I walked on. When night fell again, I still seemed no closer. The day had been long. Or did it only seem so for lack of demarkation? All my life I had spurned watches and now I would have given anything just to stare at one's changing face.

Days passed. The hunger, thirst and stiff pain of muscles were all dull now. My body had slowly shrivelled, the skin now hanging loose on bones,

the blood vessels forming ridges where the flesh had been eroded from around them. Still I persisted.

And slowly, I drew closer to my goal. Its silhouette could now be recognized. It resembled that of a tree with bare branches spread in a half-open fan, leafless and dormant – or dead. I could not identify its species, or even if it was terrestrial, but even its vague familiarity gave me comfort and spurred me forward.

The quest became obsessive, clinging to my mind, cloaking all other urges, perhaps because they could not be satisfied. I had to reach the tree. It might be dead. It might never have been alive. It did not matter.

Gradually, inevitable, I neared it. I felt I was almost upon it when night sighed its black breath again. I stumbled on, groping forward until miraculously, I collected with its trunk. I hugged the bark as though it were a long-lost friend. The surface felt smooth and spongy to my frayed sense of touch. It was warm – like sand heated by the sun. Jagged cracks split the skin but did not penetrate to the core. I collapsed at the base and slept more soundly than I had since arriving on this fractelless plain.

Morning faced the sky to a lesser dark and I saw the *tree* up close for the first time. It was no spawn of Earth, instead a grotesque parody set here as if to torment me. Its bark was black and swollen, cracked in places to reveal a crusty red-orange interior, like a half-healed wound. Its limbs only superficially resembled an elm's as they branched thinner and thinner

overhead, stretching gnarled twigs toward the blue-black sky. No leaves had ever sprouted from this skeleton. I fell to my knees and wept.

But I stayed – huddled at the base of the *tree* – I stayed. This was the only semblance of life besides myself. I could not leave it. Better a dead companion than none at all.

I picked up one of the perfectly-formed stones and let it fall. And did this again and again just to hear its clatter drowned out the monotonous drone of my own breathing and to distract me from thoughts about my fate.

It was much later – days if that timescale means anything here – that a low hum began, originating high in the treetop. It grew louder. I backed away, peering upward, curious as well as apprehensive. The pitch vaulted sharply through several octaves. Then, abruptly, a blue-white fire erupted from the tips of the *tree*'s highest twigs. An intricate gossamer of lightnings clawed at the *tree*'s crown. The cracks in the bark phosphoresced.

As suddenly as it had begun, the lightning ended. The interior glow faded and the silence returned.

I stood half-crouched several meters from the trunk, frozen between caution and inquisitiveness. Hesitantly, I approached the *tree*, reached out with one hand, and touched the swollen bark. It had not changed. I sank down at its base again. For all the pyrotechnics, nothing had changed.

Night sucked blue out of the sky once more. I lay curled among the roots of the *tree*, unable to sleep. So many unanswerable questions, which I had been able to ignore up to now, clamored in my thoughts.

Why was I here? How did I get here? Where was here?

I did not know where I was, could not recall where I had been and did not know what had happened to me. *What did any of this mean?* I wanted an answer even if there was none.

I'd had nothing to eat or drink in weeks. By rights, I should be dead. Yet I lived – in a body little more than a few shrunken organs shaking loose in a sac -- but I lived.

Sleep finally must have come. With morning, I awoke slowly – there was nothing to wake for – and got to my feet without opening my eyes, promising myself that when I did, it would all have been a dream.

It was not. The plain was as before. But something had changed. In the hollows formed by the roots were pools of water and a white doughy substance. I fell forward into one of the pools and lapped up the water like an animal. It slid down my throat like mist. I could not taste it in my greed. When I had sucked up the last drop, I seized some of the white dough and crammed it into my mouth. It was soft and moist and had almost no taste. I ate it all, half-hoping it was poisonous.

It was not.

So life went on. Each day just before dusk, the lightnings would play atop the *tree* and each morning, manna and water lay in its roots. The *tree* provided for me and I sensed that somehow it needed me as well.

We are companions on this alien plateau. Who knows how far we came from our homes, or even where they are. Though we will never understand each others' strangeness, we share a loneliness and it is that which bonds us. It is all that we have.

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