

Streams of cheerful, golden light poured in through a window that stretched from floor to ceiling. The warmth enveloped me in the most inviting caresses as I sat alone at a quiet corner table, preoccupied with my latest project of wandering aimlessly through an old book under the soft hum of fluorescent lights. Back and forth my eyes strolled across a score of brittle pages which I never read. Unable to invigorate my mood and concentrate on my usual research, I closed the faded cloth cover, slid the crumbling tome across the table, and reclined to take a steady measure of the bright world beyond my window.

I remembered when I used to sequester myself in that peaceful place, settled in a comfortable chair near the library window which overlooks a sprawling lawn and a gentle row of trees lining a narrow, sun-dappled lane. From there I could watch the students come and go, imagining them conversing on Eliot or digesting a bit of Edwards. I used to listen with great interest to their talk and wonder what they all gained by it. And, more importantly, what did they gain from me?

But I hadn't seen my favorite nook in years. Nothing had changed and I found that to be a truly satisfying feeling. I breathed a familiar sigh which lifted up and out like a dove of promise from my little ark. It always proved a cherished comfort whenever I was severely buffeted by the froth and noise of learned distractions. At least, it was when I could get it. Not everyone was aware, of course, that it was so very special to me. On occasion someone else would be sitting in my spot, but not today. Today was all mine...

"Theist?" an inquisitive voice interrupted my reverie.

I looked up reflexively in the direction of the sound and saw a young woman's head poking around the corner of a shelf lined with finger-worn books that had all lost their dustjackets. She was staring at me expectantly. I knew it was me she meant to speak with, but I couldn't work up the energy to express what was in my mind.

"I have a question," the voice intruded again. I stared at her as though she were an unwelcome apparition pounding at the chamber door of my conscience.

"Theist?" came another entreaty nearby, this time in the voice of a young man. "I have a question for you."

Without turning around, I sensed the urgency of this new request which I still did not have the heart to answer and which I knew would never go away. An impression of utter futility closed around me each time I began to respond. It was useless. Instead I rose in a sort of dazed motion from my chair. I had to leave. My favorite space had become uncomfortably crowded and no longer quite safe. As I maneuvered away from the voices, I passed by wistful rows of anonymous monographs, curious treatises on every topic imaginable, which I would never have time to read. With each step, more faces, more figures of every sort emerged from behind the generous layers of shelving and flocked in my direction.

"I have a question you can answer, Theist."

"Theist? Can you answer mine?"

"Theist? I have something to ask you."

"Theist? Can you hear me? Theist..?"

The cries began to crowd upon each other with every new encounter, some leaping over the backs of others. A few were full of pain and ragged need, some sincere and deeply interested, others smooth and sneering, dripping with doubt. A few were emboldened with anger.

“I bet you can’t answer my question, Theist!”

Seeking some escape, I glanced toward the rows of balconies above me. The numerous stories of the library seemed to stretch on forever into a vast brightness, each of them dotted with faces leaning out and calling for me by this new, yet somehow familiar, name. A horde of them collected along the stairwells and various passages. They blocked the exits and gathered in a tide of growing desperation, threatening to crush me with their desire. A fearful despair settled upon me as they pressed in close. There was nothing I could do to help them. There were so many aching expressions and no way to avoid the mad rush.

“Theist, I have an important question!”

“Can you answer this one, Theist?”

“Theist! Won’t you answer mine?”

“Theist!”

The sound gathered in strength around me as I fought to keep my head above the fray. I fell abruptly and was overcome, buried in arms and legs, half-expecting to be suffocated, yet the ground gave way and I went spinning away in a writhing descent deep into the mouth of an abyss. Thrusting out my hands, trying awkwardly to control my hurtling flesh, the oddest imaginings whirled about in my brain. I thought I might have been swallowed whole or perhaps that I had indeed suffocated earlier and that this was a taste of death. Nevertheless, the voices followed, unrelentingly. The buzz of their collective murmuring closed in behind until I smashed into a grim river of blackness which shook all my senses.

I floated in the relief of unbroken silence. Darkness was everywhere, slippery, a sort of thick, inky, fluid. It began to burn, penetrating my lungs. I strained to reach the surface and burst through. The sand-paper stench gurgled up in my throat and I wanted to vomit. Nothing would come. The feeling took up residence just beneath the point of swallowing and remained there, full of irritating indecision. I splashed and clawed at my throat, trying to cough up this new aggravation which seemed to be held supernaturally in place.

“Do you wish to speak?” a distant glimmer inquired.

I cast a wild, pleading glance in its direction. The phantom motioned to me and I gratefully expelled whatever was in my throat, hacking up all that remained. The burning was gone. When I was able to breathe again, the vision before me grew clearer and a light seemed to emanate slightly from the figure of a man who stood on a distant shore. I felt abruptly as though I were naked and tried to hide more of myself under the opaque surface I was treading.

“Where am I?” I called to him. My voice echoed my agitation. The waters began to burn and thicken all around me in a sensation that was just beneath the threshold of my

control. I floated without much effort, but also found it difficult to move and the malignant suggestiveness of my surroundings coupled with the sensation of being trapped made the experience all the more fearful to me. It became difficult to stifle my rising anger.

“What am I doing here?” I shouted.

All around the figure, a glow began to emanate slowly from a host of ambiguous forms emerging as though from some distant midnight. They formed a line of embers stretching for miles in either direction on an apparently endless crust of earth. I longed to join them and be relieved of this simmering misery. Even through my stinging sweat and agony, from the glow of them all together, I could make out more clearly the face of the central phantasm who had first appeared and spoken to me. It was my friend, the man I had met in the Jerusalem temple.

“Why did you not answer them?” he called to me, ignoring my earlier questions.

In union, the voices of every ember joined in asking, “Where are the answers we sought?” The sound of their cry all at once reverberated as if in a vast chasm and made me shiver in spite of the heat.

“I wanted to answer,” I gasped. “I did. It just felt impossible to help so many...”

“You might have answered the first who reached out to you, at least,” my friend suggested.

“You must answer the call,” rang the voices of those standing along the shore.

“There was no time. There were too many questions,” I shot back. There had always been too many questions... and too little time. What appeared to be a woman amidst the ethereal assembly stepped forward. As she did, I recognized her as the one in the library who had first interrupted my thoughts and set in motion the chain of events that brought me to this place.

“Theist?” she asked softly, repeating her earlier admonition. “I have a question.”

The burning coursing its way through my blood and in my bones grew in intensity. The weight of her need forced my breathing to gather in short bursts. I wanted to leave this place. What was the point of all this stupid prying? Why do I have to answer any of them? Nevertheless, desirous to get a few answers of my own, I bit the tip of my frustrations and controlled them long enough to ask, “What is your question, spirit?”

“Why did you abandon us?” Her plaintive cry filled my heart with a bitterness I could not explain.

“Abandon you? When did I abandon you? I don’t...”

“Why did you abandon us?” echoed the rest of the assembly.

I grimaced at the heat as it intensified and sputtered. “I don’t even know who you are. Who are you people?”

“These are the ones,” interrupted the central figure, “whom you once loved and guided. They needed you, but you left them, didn’t you, Teagan?”

“We were loved,” they intoned mournfully. Their words lessened the intensity of my anguish. As the heat somewhat subsided, I could think a little more clearly.

“Where did you learn my name?” I asked. “Who are you?”

“Answer the question,” was the response.

“It’s not true. I never left them. I played my part to the fullest. What more could I have done after all the things I tried?”

“Don’t you know?” the spectre of my friend asked.

“You know,” rumbled the spirits, pointing at me. The waters grew lukewarm and didn’t move as though they were waiting for a command from heaven to stir.

“There were too many unanswered questions. My books, my writings! That’s what they needed from me. That was what I could leave them. I could answer all their questions, but I needed time to develop the ideas. I was doing nothing for them by staying.”

“And what would they do in the meantime?” he asked in an accusing tone.

“To whom could we turn?” the gathering chanted in support, with hands uplifted in a horrific gesture, as though calling down an apocalyptic fury upon my head.

“What was I supposed to be to these people? I was of no real importance. There were plenty of others, much more capable men. It isn’t as though GOD had abandoned them to the care of a single prophet and left no one else who refused to bend a knee to the world.” I knew he would catch the Biblical allusion. Try answering that, blast you.

“Then why bother to write?” my friend insisted. The others beside him dropped their hands and stared at me, rumbling, “Much study is a weariness of the flesh.”

All the heat in that morbid lagoon began to drain away so I pushed on. “I write because it allows me to develop the foundational ideas that are needed to grasp everything else that is said. You can’t answer a question briefly with an aphoristic riddle and expect the answer to make sense. There’s too much that is hidden and remains unspoken. It creates an atmosphere of misunderstanding...”

“Then how can even those capable people you referred to help them?”

“How then shall we live?” the collected voices wondered.

I was growing weary of the pointless interrogation. “I don’t know what you mean,” was all that I could muster. The temptation to sink beneath the peace of that tepid fluid began to fill my mind. With these thoughts, my nausea began to return.

The ghostly mask of my friend continued, “If so little can be understood until everything is written, how can anyone help these people before your work is finished?”

“How can we know in part till we know in full?” the spirits challenged.

As I weakened, I fished about for an answer. “I don’t... I don’t know.”

“That is an answer you hate, isn’t it?” he asked.

The question startled me and I didn’t wait for the chorus to follow, “Yes! Yes, I should think I do.”

“And you abandoned them because you couldn’t stand to utter it, didn’t you? You abandoned them because of your arrogance,” he challenged.

“No, that isn’t true. It isn’t. My books were never about me.”

“But they are,” he insisted, his face beginning to twist and distort grotesquely, “They always were. You write because you must. Isn’t that what you always say?”

“We must write to exorcise some thing within!” chanted the people in a harmonious

mockery of my own expression.

“No... Okay, sort of, but it isn't for that alone.”

“Isn't it?” he demanded

“No, you don't understand. That's not the most important reason.”

“Then tell us what is,” came the reply. His voice seemed to chill the air and the stillest silence I've ever known followed it. It seemed to steal the very breath from my lungs and chill the waters around me. As those gathered on the shore began to clasp hands with their neighbors, every spectral visage was turned to me, each of them silently expressing the most palpable expectation as they waited for me to answer.

I felt completely on display and truly alone. The temperature of the lake dropped nearly to freezing and the cold sapped the marrow of my being more than any other thing I had endured. I trembled, naked with fear, and tucked my knees up toward my chest, floating there, holding myself like a child. No thoughts would come. I fought for them, but all the reasons and the justifications emptied from my mind. Only the staring faces remained, a silent plea etched upon every one of them. They had waited so long to hear me say it and now I could say nothing. It was too much. The floodgates of my heart finally burst.

“I'm sorry,” I sobbed. “I did this to you and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.” I babbled and wept as though my tears would quench their suffering and water the soil of a forgotten joy. But the changeless gaze of every phantom remained as implacable as parched clay which drains off the rain and cannot be satisfied. Why? their faces seemed to repeat back to me. Why did you leave? More and more tears erupted, more appeals and supplications tumbled from my tongue, and not one soul was moved. Not one of them stirred. No one was nourished. Why? Why did you? was the ruthless reply.

I couldn't bear the question anymore. “I'm sorry,” was all that I repeated until the burden of it pressed my head beneath the icy depths. I sank meekly, encased in the dead womb of my guilt, and gave up my lungs to be filled and choked with despair... until a whiteness flooded my vision and I awoke from my nightmare to a bright morning in Jerusalem.