

## Heavenly Bodies

By Hamish Roberts

A jolt, and my weight disappears. Somewhere, a liquid roar. Cold air hammers my lids, peeling back a dark spinning smear of my cabin, up and down wrenched sideways, clothes and books and wires airborne and tangling. My knees then splayed fingers crash into a wall where a floor should be; water, freezing, surges past my elbows, picks me up then folds me inward as it squeezes the last layer of air out of the room. I didn't take a breath. I've barely had time to panic. A faint light, seeping into the water around the outline of my locked door, flickers out.

Darkness. Numbing skin. All I've left to feel is my pulse. I try to form a thought, a memory, but instead convulse and inhale, and the water extends a cold salty arm into my lungs and numbs me from the inside out.

Vanishing blacks line a descent into nothing. Time disappears.

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My arms...luminous. There's nothing around or beneath or above except a seamless dark, but here I am, a human body, naked and visible and dense. My feet bed numbly into the darkness. My skin glows, buzzing with its own soft light like the picture from a television.

Something else. A star, far away, twinkling. After a time, it begins to grow. Larger, brighter. Soon, it's more like a sun, its long golden rays unpacking themselves into the dark. Only as the light draws closer still does its centre differentiate into limbs. Arms, legs, a head. With great strides, it's beside me, a golden figure, its skin a sea of starlight drifting across the contours of a human body. It grips the darkness and lowers itself onto crossed legs, its face drawing level with mine.

“Alex,” it says, “It’s all right. It’s okay. Do you remember me?” Fractal patterns of gold and silver light twist around its pupils...and something in me clicks back into place. I remember this creature from before I was born. A long, long time before. It’s my maker.

“Of course,” I say, “I remember.” My voice has an abrupt limit, as if my breath is the only air in here. “But I didn’t. I spent my whole life forgetting.”

The creature smiles. “I was always with you,” it says, “I heard all your thoughts. I felt *everything*.” I crumple into its lap. Glowing arms envelop me, the flesh warm and dry. The pressure of a life lived, stacked year on year, day on day, eases out of my body.

“I’m sorry,” I bawl, “I wish I’d known. What about everybody else? My parents, are they okay?”

The creature brushes its fingers through my hair.

“They suffer without you,” it says, “but in due course, they will follow you here and understand their suffering, just as you do now. You need only wait.” I nod, my cheek pressed into its breast. “Though perhaps, there are some already here,” it says, “who have been waiting for you.” It lifts its arms, spreads its fingers, and undoes the endless dark around us like a knotted fabric. Its kingdom floods through.

Grassy earth nestles between my toes. A warm current lifts the hairs along my forearm. Above hangs an expanse of brilliant sky, white golden light smudged across the blue by a haze of water vapour. Mountains cut violet silhouettes along the horizon. Between and beneath them and us, the land slopes downward to a blurred depth and, turning, I see our mountain rise far higher, so high its upper reaches are overwhelmed by the blue glare of the sky. Everywhere, from the valley beneath to the most distant mountains, is covered with long, wild grass that shimmers as it shifts in the breeze, and violet and red flowers that glint and, between them, millions, billions for all I can tell, of shameless, naked human beings. Old and young and every step in between, sitting and walking and smiling, under every tree and on every rock.

None waiting here for me, I don't think. Except...the only family that passed before I did was our dog, a Labrador named Lyra. She was twelve when she died, just a little older than I was.

Perhaps she's here. Healthy and young.

"Is it Lyra, waiting here for me?" I ask. "Where are the animals?" The creature sits cross-legged an inch off the mountain floor, its light dispersing into the day like rivers into the sea. It smiles and fades away.

Sunlight pools and trickles through the air like a liquid. The dark that borders memory sits like an ocean between everything I ever did and this dazzlingly definite moment. I sit alone on the mountainside and wait for it to crumble, for an alarm clock to pierce the dream. But it doesn't. All that remains of the life I've lived is an empty space it used to fill. Where a circus of hunger and satiation, ambition and depression vied for every moment, where a webbed myriad of causally connected plans laid over the incoming days, weeks and years pulled at each singular present...there lies nothing. How silly that all was. All that wanting and getting and wanting again.

I pick myself up and step down the slope. I'm light on my feet. People smile. I smile back. A hand slots into mine: a young woman's, with three small children swinging round her knees. They died starving in her arms, she says. I can't imagine, I tell her. Everybody here has suffered, she replies. Now, we understand why.

I squeeze her hand and walk on. More stop me and speak, all strangers, some from the city I grew up in, some from civilisations that vanished from the earth thousands of years before I was born. Think of that force always pushing gazes downward in the street, tying everybody back into almost everybody else's scenery. It does not exist here. These strangers lay their hands on me and look me in the eye. We don't need to share language or the detail it conveys. Everything is evident in our met gazes and the rub of our skin.

A face enters my mind.

It's sharp and sunken. Aimless eyes, a mouth propped open by a tube. A face that tells little of what lies behind it. Just a dull awareness of her trajectory.

Now I think of it, I can dig up some biographical information regarding this face. It's a girl's, a young woman. I liked her when I was seventeen. She liked me back. But I've kept no tangible impression of any of that. After she passed, I quickly learnt to avoid my memory of her and, unattended to, it decayed. Within a few years, all I could bring to mind with any clarity was that sharp and sunken face she signed off with. As it is now.

She must be here, somewhere. I wouldn't have thought I'd ever think of her again, but now, I have...now, she's *here*. She could tap me on my shoulder. I find myself walking down the valley, scanning millions of strangers for a face I can't recall.

Time moves forward unmeasured. The sun stays rooted to the dead centre of the sky, and I take uncounted steps and cross off uncounted faces, till something latches onto my periphery and turns me toward it.

It's a girl, a hundred yards to my right, sat on a grassy riverbank. The sun rests too brightly on her pale skin to discern any detail: she's just a shape, reeling me toward her. I lower my eyes and keep them down as I approach, till my shadow slips over her toes.

There she is. A face I blurred out of recognition, adjusting into focus in front of my eyes. A girl. An eighteen-year-old. I follow the curve of her arms, the healthy flesh painting itself over the memory I've kept of her depleted, yellowing body. I rest on the swell restored to her cheeks, the blood returned to her lips.

She's not yet looked up. She's curled around something in her hand, her brows tight with concentration. I sway, unbalanced by a wrenching feeling in my stomach: an unfathomable distance zipping itself up. More of her tumbles through. The sound of her voice. The laugh she

threw into the clamour at parties. The unguarded drift of her eyes. I watched them as dawn spilled into my bedroom.

It's a round stone in her left hand. And another in her right, this one thin and sharp. She strikes the round with the edge of the sharp, and again, every few seconds. Between her crossed legs are three other stones, with four cylinders protruding from each one, like half-formed limbs. She pauses, holding the rounder stone close to her eye, and blows some of its powdered matter into the breeze.

I say her name. She looks up, shielding the light with a palm on her forehead.

"Yes?" She squints. "You aren't..." she trails off, and then reaches and tugs me to the floor and stares. "Oh," she says, "has it been so long already?"

I sit upright on my knees, unsure what to say. Her eyes jump anxiously between mine. Then, she places three fingers on my cheek and slides them down and around the curve of my jaw.

"Look at you," she says. "You're a man now."

I shut my eyes. A few seconds of dark to collect myself in. Long buried hours unearth themselves: alone in my bedroom, exorcising her after-image.

Eyes open. She's still here, just as she was a few seconds ago, and many years before that, too. An exact likeness. A foot of air rests between us.

"I hope you don't think I've been waiting for you here all this time," she says. She watches me, as I struggle to find my voice.

"I...I didn't think you were here at all," I say eventually, "I didn't think you were anywhere."

"Of course," she says. She picks up her stones. "You were as young as I was. You must have forgotten all about me."

A silence ensues. It sits uncomfortably between us, waiting to be filled, as she starts striking the rock again. A spark flies into the river.

“What are you doing?” I ask tentatively.

She shrugs. “Just killing time. But what became of you? What did you do with the rest of your life?” She says this without looking up, her focus on the stones. It’s odd: she’s more closed to me than any of the strangers I passed on my way down the mountain. What a mouthful words are, I think, now I have to use them again.

“Nothing,” I return, because I don’t recall much of anything, just a vague and growing sense of dissatisfaction. “Nothing important, anyway. Not now I’m here.”

She smiles, though not to me. Just to her stone. “And the end? Was it painful?”

“It was quick.”

She smiles again, again keeps it to herself. I don’t recognise that smile. The smile I remember was shared.

She pauses, one stone held above the other.

“I want to show you something,” she says.

She grins a wide, farcical grin and this I do recognise or at least feel I am about to. It promises...*something*. Perhaps a joke only I could understand. She drops the stones and digs up a clump of earth from the ground beside her, pulls my hand forward and pushes the dirt into my palm. Her fingers wrap up mine and guide them up and down, smoothing out the clump. It hardens and transforms, inexplicably, into a gleaming, clean knife that lies flat on my open palm. Before I can stop her, she clamps my hand with both of hers round the handle and, with a sharp tug, pulls me towards her and plunges the blade deep into the fragile flesh of her neck.

A wad of blood springs out of the split flesh; more gushes round the blade and down her chest. I lurch backwards, the knife with me. The blood follows. It splashes onto my belly. Her eyes roll up; she’s falling back. I grab her, saying her name, her blood in my mouth, but—

She's laughing. Baring her blood-stained teeth. She pushes me off. The blood that only a moment before covered most of her and I is now, as if it has a will of its own, floating in the air above us, sieving the sunlight to a brilliant red. It pours itself elegantly back into her open wound. Every millimetre. The colour returns to her cheeks. The wound seals itself and disappears. She sits up and stares at me, her grin drooping. "Ta da," she says. Then, "Don't be so serious. It was just a joke."

An iron taste lingers on my teeth. I reach slowly forward and place my fingertips on her windpipe. It's smooth and dry where the wound was. My finger slides beneath her jaw. She watches me. There's her pulsing blood, locked safely inside of her. Here's my own heart, I feel it beating on my ribs. Arteries inflating beneath my skin.

"Oh, *come on*," she says. "This place stitched us back together once. It'll do it again, any time you ask it to. Course it will."

"Why..." I begin, unsure of what I'm asking. The question hangs there on its own. She shrugs. "Please, don't do that again," I say, "I can't see you like that. You looked like..." But I keep my next thought to myself. The image of her I kept, dying in the hospice: she looked so much more like it then, drained of her blood. "Just don't do that again, please."

"Well," she says, "You couldn't actually watch me *die*, even if you wanted to."

"I don't," I assure her.

"Well," she says again. Her grin is gone. "You won't. You can't."

"You..." I begin, but pause, questioning my question as soon as I think it. She eyes me impatiently, spinning her hands as if to hurry me along. I can only stare, so she answers the questions anyhow.

"Yes, I do."

"You want to?"

She nods and watches me, weighing my reaction. I think perhaps she is about to break character, to burst into laughter and take back what she's said, just like she took back all the blood she emptied into the air between us. But she doesn't.

She wants to die.

"You can't," I say, "You don't remember the pain."

"I remember."

"Okay, well, that's over now, isn't it? Everything's okay now."

"Do you remember how good I was getting at the piano?"

"What?"

"The piano? Don't you remember?"

I think. "Of course," I say. I don't.

"I'll remind you. I'd just started on my Grade Eight when I got sick. After that, I didn't know. My teacher said I should go on and do a diploma but...well, it wasn't something I had to figure out, in the end. I had six months on my back in a hospital bed, with nothing to do that would lead to anything. All those piano lessons, they'd loop round my head. In the dark, lights out, TV off. I'd play snippets on top of my duvet. All that muscle memory, all those lessons I'd had for ten years, every week, all that practicing. None of it was going anywhere anymore. Those lessons weren't for anything, they were just...parts of a life I was saying goodbye to. Do you understand?" She glances at me and shakes her head: I clearly don't. "No. It was too sudden for you. How about this: I couldn't run away from or fight what was coming. All I could do was try to make friends with it. And that I did, although it wasn't easy. But here..." She waves a hand above her head at the surrounding expanse, "...this is just endless. Aimless. Nothing adds up to anything."

I don't understand. But there is something she is failing to comprehend, I'm sure, about this place and why we're here. I open my mouth, intent on explaining exactly what it is — and



it's frustrating, trying to voice my thought, when I've communed so easily with everybody else here without having to. My mouth shuts; the thought sinks into my stomach like a stone.

"Go," she says.

"I don't want to leave you." As soon as I say this, I realise that, perhaps, I do. Perhaps I want to walk so far into the valley I don't know how to find her again. Am I to spend an eternity making conversation with this slightly hostile, strange young woman? Yet, I cannot take my eyes off of her. I don't recognise the person beneath, but the surface of her, that is *just* as it was and in such sunlit detail! The sheer clarity of her seems invaluable. "I'm here now," I find myself saying with a hand on her arm, "Things will be better."

She shuffles out of my grip. "You've no obligation to me," she says. "You're a lot older than the person I knew. I took up an even smaller fraction of your life than you did mine. Just...go. Forget me. I'm not why you're here."

I get up but go no further, unable to wrench my eyes away.

"Go on," she says, pointing a finger down the valley without looking up.

I turn. My gaze stays locked on the girl till the spin of my head snaps her off. A long, backed up breath spills out my lungs. I don't know how long it's been held inside. I follow the river. I trade smiles with millions of strangers, not daring to look around, but I feel the growing distance between us dissolving her image. Till finally, I stop and pivot on my heel and I don't know her dot of sunlit human flesh from any of the billions dispersed across heaven.

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Time moves forward unmeasured. I wander the heaven scape, admiring the foliage. Strangers catch my eye; we trade knowing smiles. Just the briefest scan of the other transmits all that either needs to know. The sun stays locked in its place. I nestle into my timeless, heavenly existence.

Or at least I try. At the very back of my awareness, something gnaws, something quietly intolerable. A fear. I notice it already growing, like the swell of a bite mark. It's her. It's not that I haven't forgotten her, because I swear, I have, just as she asked. It was quicker this time. As soon as I turned, the weight of her memory followed the rest of my life and dispersed into the haze. But I can't forget the fact that she's *here*. I could wander for a thousand lifetimes, and she could still cross my path and reinstate every inch of that eighteen-year-old girl I knew into my head.

At some point or another, I decide I have to go looking for that face that I am so keen to avoid. And some amount of time later, I find her by the river in the same spot, exactly as I left her.

A small army of stone animals sits in formation between her legs. Elephants, zebras, lions and wolves, with snarls and roars delicately worked into the minutiae of the stone. An embryonic mammal lies in her left hand.

I regard her dumbly for a full minute or more whilst she chips away at her stone. The blemishes affirming the curve of her arms, the smattering of fine shadows her downcast lashes throw along her freckled cheeks...every textural detail of her small frame dwarfs the endless extension of mountain, valley and sky all around us. My stomach rumbles. I should turn and run, as far as I can.

She glances up at me. "What?"

I rush my words, afraid of losing my thread of thought. It's not fair, I tell her. If she really doesn't want to be here, she shouldn't be forced to. We need to do something to change her situation. She stays still as I speak and for a while longer once I've finished, her eyes planted on the belly of her stone. I start to feel unsure if she's even heard me, when, quietly, she says, "You're the first person who's ever said that to me."

I sit down at her side, so I can keep my eyes on the river and off her whilst she speaks. She's asked the creature many times, she says, and many of the people here too, why should she not be allowed to die? And the question has never been answered, only dismissed, as if it makes no sense.

"There's nothing you can do," she says.

Perhaps she's right. But I have to do something. I won't ever feel truly relaxed whilst she's still here. "Let me make a case for you," I say, "It's got to be worth a try."

"Anything's worth a try," she says. "I'm not busy. It won't work, though." I stand up and offer her my hand. She eyes it warily. "Why are you doing this?"

"I can't stand the thought of you being here," I say, "Suffering."

She shrugs and takes my hand, and we wander up the mountain, looking for the creature.

Sometime later, we spot it: a gleaming silhouette, rippling in the wind a few metres up the river. Staring at us. It beckons and turns, and we follow, a little further up the mountain and into a level and shaded grove. The creature halts and waits, whilst a fresh quilt of darkness pours from its raised fingertip and billows upward. It draws the quilt over our heads as we arrive at its side, and then beneath our feet, the dark blotting out the ground as it goes, till the encircling seams meet and seal away every last remnant of the day outside.

Here we sit, suspended. The creature's light extends indefinitely into the dark. My gaze slips without warning onto the girl, her surface vivid, illuminated from within. Then, a tap on my shoulder, and I'm drawn into the creature's blinding gaze.

"You have a question." it says.

"Yes," I say, "We want..." I glance down: she's curled herself up beside me, her head bowed between her knees. The creature stays silent and still. Its skin vibrates and hums.

"We want...to know," I say, "Why do you keep her here?"

"Where?"

“Here, in this place, and in this body. I mean...” I trail off. She stays hidden between her legs. “Why don’t you let her die?”

“What would that mean, to die, *here*?” the creature asks.

“You brought her here. You remade her body.” I motion at her: the tensed, fastened limbs of an eighteen-year-old girl. “Just, undo that process.”

“She is made of her body,” the creature replies, “I cannot take it from her.”

“Okay, undo *her* then. Whatever she is, undo that. That’s what she wants.”

The darker shades of light that form the creature’s brow burrow together. It turns to her, a thought poisoning its lips.

“Perhaps,” it whispers to itself, “perhaps we could. On a one-time basis. I would like to see it.” Then, in a hurried fashion, it says, “Alright. I will allow it. But do it in here. And be quick.” The creature stands tall and already, there is a knife lying in its open palm. The girl lifts her head and slowly straightens upward, her eyes trained on the blade.

“You’re sure?” she says very quietly. The creature bows its head. She raises a hand and brushes her fingertips along my cheek. She whispers a *thank you*, carried by the barest tremor of her breath. She grasps the handle. Her eyes close. The knife flashes toward her neck— and there she keeps it, the tip of the blade dug into her windpipe.

“Harriet—”

It’s a short, incisive movement, driven from her elbow. The blade runs along her throat, from the tip to the hilt, cleaning splitting her flesh as it goes. The knife falls, blood splutters; she opens her mouth and inhales a cracked gurgle of a breath, then moves her tongue to her teeth, as if to say something. She looks panicked as she falls. There’s an odd, timbreless thud, as the darkness catches her weight at our feet.

Her eyes still. Her lids droop. She lies there, suspended, limp, the blood still flowing from her neck, far below our sight. I expected something more to happen, for the body to dissipate,

dissolve, for the light rising from her skin to fade. But she stays as she is, head dipped back, skin bright, an arm rested across her belly, her fingers slowly slackening from the grip that held the knife. The blood flow lessens to a rhythmic drip. Perhaps the heart's still beating.

I turn to the creature. "We've got to do something with her," I say. "Bury her." It ignores me. It tilts forward, fixated on the sprawled body. The fractal splits of light forming its irises start to spin. With a hand on my chest, the creature launches itself over the girl and, pushing a finger and thumb between her teeth, parts her jaw and leans the side of its head close.

"Nothing," it whispers. It draws back and peels one of her half-closed lids, the light from the tip of its finger spilling inside her dilated pupil. "Nothing," it says again. It fidgets, then presses the skin beneath the wound, and a thicker stream of blood runs out over its fingers, dying their starlight a molten red.

"Leave her be," I say. It's got her by the shoulders now. It shakes hard. The head swings around the neck. Bones creak and snap. "Stop it!" The creature pays me no attention. It shakes harder.

"Where is it?" it screams. "Where is it?"

"Please stop!" I shout. It pauses. Then bores a nail into her left eye.

"Stop..." But it won't or can't hear me. Its eyes are revolving faster and faster, blurring into disks of vibrating light.

I turn and run, spreading my fingers and clawing into the dark. They snatch at the fabric, and I pull it apart and tumble, with a thump, onto the mountain side.

The day is blindingly bright. I stay on my stomach and probe between blades of grass as I adjust to the light. When I lift myself up, there are eyes on me. Hundreds. Millions. People everywhere, dotted down the valley and up to the horizon, naked as the day they were born, stopping and turning and seeking me out. It's the blood.

“Whose is it?” calls a voice— a large man with a jutting belly a few metres down the slope, approaching me with a finger aimed at my chest. “Whose blood is that?” A crowd’s growing behind him.

“Tell us whose,” calls a woman to his left. I peer down at the blood smeared on my chest.

“Is it yours?” demands a child at the woman’s knees. I shake my head.

“Not mine,” I say, “A girl’s. Just a girl’s.”

“And it let her bleed?” asks the woman. She stares at me or rather the blood, her eyes wide, her jaw loose. I nod and she turns and screams as loudly as she can, “It let her bleed!” Another voice and a child’s and then many more all chorus the same. “It let her bleed!” Others scream the words and then hundreds and then thousands more, and the screams roll down the mountain in a deafening cacophony of sound. They spread in a wave throughout the valley. They run up and shake the distant mountains.

The creature appears at my side, drenched in her blood. Spheres of white light sit where its eyes did, shaking chaotically. It sticks out its tongue, licks the blood off its fingers and shudders with pleasure, swaying on its legs like a drunk thing.

“Yes,” it calls, its voice rising into a thunder that crashes down the mountain after the screams. “Yes, I let her bleed. Go ahead, if you are curious. I think I might be.” The voice reaches the horizon, quieting the sea of screams as it goes. A collective intake of breath follows in its wake, then a silence, which ripples up from the valley, right to the edge of the crowd where I and the creature stand. The collective focus of the uncounted billions strewn across the valley shatters, as each individual takes their eyes off of me, off the blood on my chest, and finds their own patch of earth or sky to think alone in. Nonetheless, each inner struggle soon results in the same outward decision. An old woman, just a few metres to our right, picks up a clump of earth and, with a rub of her hands, it transforms into a gleaming dagger. She eyes its tip and then, with a resolute nod, raises it high above her; so do many others— steel flashes at

every angle and distance— and, as the old woman yanks the knife down and into her delicate flesh, so does every other human being, in their billions.

Blood flows out of every one of them. Cries and yelps swarm my ears, as close and far dropping bodies spread like a windswept fire. The creature God staggers down the mountain. With a giggle, it slits its own throat and falls to the ground. Starlight seeps out its neck into the earth. The cries swell up and saturate into something deeper and darker than the sum of its parts. Then, like a failed engine, they stutter and stop. Across the valley: no being left standing. Only bodies, rolling over each other, blood spilling from their necks, their bellies, their wrists.

Blood is trickling over my feet. Entire mountain faces in the distance are growing red and liquid. Above, behind, something roars; I turn: a great, towering red wave throws the valley into shadow as its highest extent reaches across the sun. Its swell sucks me up and in and then crashes down the mountain. Channels of pressure throw me this way and that, my lungs crushed, my limbs thrashing against nothing, my eyes slammed shut, the iron stench rinsed in and out of my nostrils. Some way down, I bounce against rocky ground and then surface, gasping, my flapping hands landing on the hair, the arms of a lifeless body. Together, we are swept down the mountain by the river of blood.

I wonder, after an uncounted, uncountable passage of time, if we will ever hit level ground, if there is not always an ever-lower valley the blood will pour us into next. But it does come, eventually. The blood thins to my chest, and I let go of the corpse and drift along with my toes scraping even sandy ground beneath. Too late, I spot a tree trunk emerging out of the red. It veers past just out of my reach. Another blocks my path and brings me to a halt. I pull myself up onto its branches. The wood is gnarled and dark and damp. The clouds are thick with blood now. A jungle, twisted and crooked, lies out as far as I can see.

Animals emerge from the dark recesses of the trees. Snakes glide through the blood, cheetahs splash their paws in it and pigs lap it up. Mice swim past, squeaking. Monkeys swing

down from the trees, chattering to each other, before hesitantly dipping their fingers in and scooping a few drops through their lips. A spider a few branches above bares its fangs, a fly stuck between them. I look down and catch a cheetah's eye. When will she realise she can sink her teeth into the pig beside her and rip the flesh off its bones?