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passage one

by Josh Smith

This oxygen fills your bloodstream with more intention than the sky's. Sun's light filtered out by depth, exists as ephemeral memories projected down on scales and eyes. Sweat-soaked vision in a bed of stars. The sweat too heavy, the stars floating creatures convulsing in the grasp of this kinetic motion. And the sound – a constant, rolling explosion from far off, yet within your skull. A world much too real for dreams, too natural for reality. Its movements intrigue you, they speak of the past. Statements encoded in dead languages, genetically deciphered as action.

Legs pumping, toes digging in the sand, working independent of your mind. Carrying you deeper into the flowing dark. The ground softens more with each step, with the depth, vision grows clearer, breathing comes smooth. No fears of suffocation – stopped dead in your tracks.

Pinpoint prick of light pierces blackness ahead, growing into a radiant cube proportioned by Pythagoras' hand. It expands hesitant, sincere, until its cool air passes soft silence across your face, your body. Standing dry in geometric atmosphere, static now, its height just enough to contain you. The opposite wall shudders, begins to bulge and leak, dripping as if gravity had shifted for a moment, reaching tentacles toward you that grow thick and twist back upon themselves in pulsating blobs. This amoebic visitor keeps you pressed to one side, vision locked as it finds focus and extends two wet stalks toward the ocean floor, a thin branch on each side. It mirrors your constant shape, liquid features oscillate. Silent, still, he sweeps his brush through your mind, painting his message in living images.

A turtle crawls from his sand-weathered shell and plods into the outstretched arms of sea. Swift evolution aids his descent, with muscles tense, he walks upright, quickens his pace, absorbs the water into his spongy skin. He stops to rest on a rounded rock, overhearing tales as they drift and are lost among passing creatures. A shark explains his battle scars to cautious crabs who busy themselves constructing shelters in the sand. A squid paints an abstract that shifts with the turbulence of schooling fish who tally votes and choose their leader. A great whale casts his shadow to the floor, mumbling to himself, scouring for the water's source.

Awake from one dream to the next, dizzy with questions, unable to speak. Staring into (through) the lucid blue figure, following each ebb and flow of his personal ocean, lifting your being into resounding illusion.

Looking down upon yourself, view from the sky, your body circling streets in a crowded city. Gazing deeper, to the ones who clog the roads, you see their eyes, noses, mouths, even ears have been smoothed away, leaving polished round flesh to guide the functions of their meandering souls. You (the other you, the one being watched from above) notice the faceless walkers and burst into full sprint, running with closed eyes to avoid the inconceivable. You run (you watch yourself run) without hesitation directly into the ocean until you (in the sky) can no longer see yourself (underwater).

Your head spins again, feet feel the wet grit. The liquid saint simply nods his head and melts away into the dark unseen. The cube implodes, gradually soaking you with a rush of refreshed senses.

Continuing along this rolling terrain, unconcerned with direction, occupied instead with silent statements dispersed by the motions of aquatic travelers gliding around your every angle. Feel it radiating from their scales and skin, cool waves become warm, press gently against you. Liquid force increasing with the temperature until your salt beads and merges with the blue. Your breath cut short with a shock, an electric bolt of tension, of struggle.

Looking upward, a single glowing eye stares back, searing you internally, your surroundings boiling. Hunched down, digging through mud, trying to escape, instead lifted up, the eye burning hotter, determined to glare straight into your core. This heat cooks off the weight that held your feet in sand. Struggling, still becoming lighter than the water. Gaining speed, flesh peeling away, the surface glitters just above – you can taste the air. Face first; you break the ocean's crest. In your wake, seared creatures and strips of skin swirl into the air. These disciples drop; you continue to rise, a leaf imprisoned within tempestuous sky.

Two grey clouds charge at you from opposing sides, pursue each other in spirals, converge and take shape of a plateau to catch your stripped and beaten form. Legs quake on this unstable tier, eyes shy from sun. Forceful winds swell, shoving you to your knees. Their tones brought to life by deranged orchestra, its operatic vocalist shouting whispers of feather-light nonsense that suddenly form declarations of planets being dropped at your feet. Hurricane syllables collide, thundering at your presence, coursing fear through your body. Curiosity urges you to look for the source of this wind swept voice that sets your bones trembling, but anxiety overcomes desire and your unassuming, nervous eyes stay down. The air around you shifts from hot to cold, its words not from a single place, but from all.

“Why do you bring yourself to this altitude to wish for level ground? Have you run from one existence to cower from the next?” Your eyelids clamp down so quick, so tight that you fear they will melt together. You fear becoming one of the smooth oval faces. Gathering the will and letting the light back in reveals the feet of the one you kneel before. His mouth cracks open, the voice still circles from every direction of infinite sky.

“On your feet, swine!” A gust forces compliance. His eyes burn through you with the force of twin suns, the pain of anticipation creeps through every nerve. Your eardrums collapse.

“You are not worthy of my time, insect. Take this as a gift, be on your way.” His arm extends, drowning you in its shadow. Frozen, you feel the fingers wrap tightly around your skull. Your spine cracks and stretches, feet dangling useless above this cloud. With a quick snap of his wrist, the giant sets you on a speeding course to solid Earth. Death mocks you as it approaches from the soil. The rushing air forces its way down your throat, and in the instant you are unable to exhale, you accept the oncoming dirt as your grave. Final breath taken, close your eyes and smile.

Your eyes open, then immediately close; protecting themselves from the

swarming dust. Struggling to your feet, stumbling from the cloud, realizing that your breathing has resumed, rub the mask from your face and look to the sky. The clouds twist and coalesce, as if to watch as you take in your surroundings, the roads, the buildings, the scent of sea salt, the crashing of waves at your back. You have been here before. The collective demeanor of the natives sets your mind aflame with overwhelming panic. They stumble about with erratic motions beneath hollow towers and crumbled homes, eternally stamping dirt into the earth. Gradually fading into obscurity.

You remember the way the city looked when you watched the people's features fade away. When you began to feel the change within yourself – the fear that overtook your existence. This city at one time had a name, its people once able to pronounce it. Time slipped by, unbeknownst to the city, which eventually forgot itself. The people's lives became ancient stories, lost in the heat and forgotten as well. They no longer lived, but simply existed as fragments of dust drifting among ruins.

Lungs thick with the native earth, you recall the suffocation of life in this place. Though dirt lines your eyes, refuse to let them blink. The desperation of the faceless turns your stomach as they shuffle past, instinctively working to welcome you into the catacombs of their dead homes. They persuade without gesture, with a link that has grown from one subconscious to your own. Your skin has gone dry and fused with the dirt that cracks and falls from your arms, chest and legs. One forgotten soul makes his way toward you with steps fragmented to match his face. He moves closer, but you find yourself unable to move, your feet have fused with the sand.

As the distance decreases between you and this approaching figure, you can feel the moisture escaping from both your body and the surrounding air. You feel each organ inside as it dries; withering, shriveling and functionless. The moment before your eyes become dust, you see the smoothed face so close it has blurred. His left foot steps into your right, followed by the leg, pulling the rest of his form into yours. This merge is abrasive, bodies shifting into opposing sands that grind and twist together and against.

This whirl of grit that has become your mass has taken what little color was left and dyed it a shade between brown and gray. The noise of the sand as it sifts through your mind reduces all exterior sounds into a fuzzy, monotonous drone. A muted urgency overcomes you. Sedated, yet anxious; heart races, mind slows. Trying to scream only produces a strong whisper. The world spins into a squealing finale of distant clatter and comes to a halt. It is then that you see it – all of it – from every muted perspective of every faceless wanderer.