

**THE SPEECH OF  
FLOWERS  
AND VOICELESS THINGS**

Sakina B. Fakhri



LAZULI LITERARY GROUP  
New York  
2018

Published by Lazuli Literary Group | New York

Copyright © Lazuli Literary Group (2018)  
All rights reserved

ISBN: 978-0-9994243-1-5

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE TITLE

“The words of a dead man  
are modified in the guts of the living.”  
- W.H. Auden, *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*

### Original

*Le langage des fleurs et des choses muettes!* – Charles Baudelaire, 1857

### Translations

*The secret speech of flowers and dumb things!* - Jack Collings Squire, 1909

*The speech of flowers and of voiceless things!* - Lewis Piaget Shanks, 1931

*The language of flowers and silent things!* - Said Leghlid, 1934

*The voices of the flowers and of all voiceless things!* - George Dillon, 1936

*The speech of flowers and other voiceless things!* - Roy Campbell, 1952

*The language of flowers and silent things!* – William Aggeler, 1954

---

# CONTENTS

---

## PART ONE

*The Assembly at ATLAS* .....3

## PART TWO

*Amelia Devises a Village* .....48

## PART THREE

*J.B. Jutterten and the Three Regions* .....55

## PART FOUR

*Crossing the Acheron* .....61

## INTERLUDE

## PART FIVE

*Such an Underwater World* ..... 108

## PART SIX

*A Legacy for J.B. Jutterten* ..... 151

## PART SEVEN

*A Supplemental Lattice of Branches* ..... 163

## PART EIGHT

*Of Parotene, A Substance Called into Existence from the Imaginary*..... 222

## PART NINE

*Fell and Weaverman and the Necessary Fallout*..... 228

PART TEN

*Aphasic Liberties* ..... 238

PART ELEVEN

*A Pronged Approach to the Primary Potentiate* ..... 280

PART TWELVE

*The Sort of Flower One Would Draw if One Were to Draw a Flower....* 293

PART THIRTEEN

*A Hand Unseen Will Usher in a Flood* ..... 298

PART FOURTEEN

*The Trial* ..... 331

PART FIFTEEN

*From Whichever Corner of the Earth* ..... 343

## PROLOGUE

What sort of machinery might be wrought such that one line of poetry could instigate a world war? What machinery, such that one line of poetry could halt it?

Amidst the vast expanse of the Sahara, somewhere just south of Gebel Mara and north of the Adawama Highlands, a small pocket of the earth has been deliberately peopled.

An atmosphere of inveterate industriousness pervades this hidden village, founded under the joint auspices of Purpose and Secrecy, and one can be assured that the Association of Translation Liaisons of the Altruistic States (ATLAS) is an association possessed of endless nobility. That is, it conducts its philanthropic doings to an admirable pitch, having made certain that no calculable benefit is sustained to itself or its inhabitants by so doing. It is here that Amelia's "lingualists" perform work that is of great consequence to a world irredeemably unaware of its existence.

Viewing this compound from the air, the unknowing pilot might note something utterly unremarkable—a concrete boundary surrounding buildings thought to be uninterestingly abandoned, a relic of a village not old enough to be historically significant. One thinks the Bedouins of the Sahara might have chanced upon it at some time or another, but encountering what they thought to be a wall, they did not scale it, and what they thought to be an obstacle, they moved around it.

Still, we might say that the reams of pages that passed through the trained hands of Amelia's translators comprised the veins of an international universe—that, in some sense, they governed all things from the adjudication of courts in Brazil to the productivity of factories in Iran.

Perhaps what follows is a story that can be of use to another such enterprise, if ever another instance arises; or, perhaps, it is

nothing but the vain recounting of a singularly valiant attempt to improve the collective lot of the human race.

# PART ONE

—

*The Assembly at ATLAS*



[1]

Astor sees a camel at sunrise

It is often the case that the disturbed sleep of an individual youth contributes little to matters of international import; an unwarranted nap is rarely cause for military alarm, and nighttime roving has no more than twice been deemed a harbinger of widespread political unrest. On the whole, sleep has enjoyed a reputation of innocuousness and solicitude, visiting most with regular and unfrightening frequency. There are still those, however—a minor drove of eccentric analysts—who continue to claim that every world calamity can be traced precisely to just such a mundane, private event like sleep, an event that affords the thinker the sort of freedom that can only take place in entire visual darkness; a moment in which the mind is unencumbered by the necessity of processing external stimulation and is left vulnerable to the possibility of engendering a single original thought.

Upon this second basis, we hover at the bedside of one eighteen year old boy, Astor, so that we might find this burgeoning thought before it has branched into a hundred unruly manifestations, when it is yet something so delicate that the idea of its fruition is so inconceivable as to be uninteresting. Whether Astor's insomnia will precipitate the chain of innocent and inadvertent happenings that will animate the rest of our story, or whether this position will belong to something else, it is too soon to say. We know only that at two o'clock AM on one particular day, in one particular building where thirty other boys lay tucked into their beds, exactly one boy lay awake in his.

Poor Astor had been in bed quite some time—he had put forth the requisite effort—but sleep seemed in every moment to be just beyond his grasp. He strove to mimic the suffocation of the

night, to burrow into his pillow with the same authority that swept the nighttime into day. In all his years, he had learned only this: that sleep would be different. It would overcome him, from top to bottom, would scatter the events of his day over memories, like ashes. It would bend the cold linearity of the ceiling into waves; it would dissolve this room into others. But, as he dug his face deeper into his pillow, hoping that either the former would soften or the latter, he only became more conscious of the pressure of the feathers on the pressure of his skull, and nothing did dissolve, and nothing seemed to bend. This, Astor thought, was what it was to be awake.

It was only a failure only if one did, in fact, wish to be asleep; only then was this “being awake” something to regret—this Astor reasoned to himself as he extricated himself from his bedsheets. He gently re-made his bed, just having gotten out of it, and comported himself as though some part of himself—an Astoral projection, if you will—still slumbered peacefully beneath the covers.

*Three hours and thirty-two minutes.* Three hours and thirty-two minutes until he was to be seated at Assembly. Astor was more than conscious of the reality: he had ample time to stay awake and ample time to rest, but insufficient time for both. He slid his unlit lantern across the nightstand in one decisive stroke; in this, the intransigence of the hour was replete.

In the absence of the fingerling ghosts of his bedroom lantern, the night had been stretched thin to translucency. The oncoming morning brushed away the darkness, like dust, revealing patches of the sparse furnishings of Astor’s surroundings. His dresser yet cast no shadow; his mirror reflected nothing; but they were both there, just the same, and the knobs of his closet and the handles of his doors protruded defiantly from somewhere amidst the muffling, pre-dawn gray.

Astor slipped into the worn armchair beneath the window, wishing himself into a hypnagogic state that was no fair substitute for the proper sleep that was already—three hours and twenty-two minutes—a forgone impossibility. He drowsily reached to unlatch the window with one hand as he rested his cheek on the other. His eyes traced the rising and the falling of the Saharan sand dunes that organized the world into shadowed peaks outside.

Astor’s attention began to wane; the movement of the desert slowed with his breathing, and he grew unconscious of the cold-

ness of the pane. Here he might have dropped off into a heedless dream, if not for the deep-throated German mumbling issuing from the far wall. The source was most assuredly Hendrik—Astor’s colleague from an office three floors down in the *Department of Texts That Have Proven to be of Educational Use and Interest*. This hard-headed former European spent his nights tossing relentlessly; his mornings, awakening effortlessly. (This sleep-talking represented a gross injustice, Astor thought: Hendrik slept through his own somnolent ramblings, while Astor lay awake, nightly, subjected to their every convolution.)

Astor had set his sights on the activities of the *Global Department of Print Media of Daily and Monthly Occurrences* before it had been announced to them that the assignment would be permanent. With journalism, Astor sought the privilege of being certain that his work did, in fact, directly affect the doings of the world—that his words interacted with the words of individuals of the living, contemporaneous variety (unlike the ancient mythical scribes of Avi’s texts in the *Department of Religious Documents on Spiritual Thought* or the posthumously renowned novelists revered by Zixin in the *Department for the Housing and Curating of Literary Documents*). He imagined that he would feel a sense of communion, playing his (albeit hidden) part, in the reportage of world affairs. Two years of Translation Training and eight years in the Department had done much to dull the sheen of these ambitions, however, and Astor now believed the position he sought—the helm from which he might most loyally carry out Amelia’s philanthropic vision—was one level above the level he currently occupied. He had groomed himself for the ultimate promotion—to the position currently occupied by Clarence, Amelia’s right-hand fellow—and this post was respectfully conceded to Astor in the hearts and minds of all the lingualists. Astor hoped that, in two hours and thirty-seven minutes, this promotion would be made official by Amelia’s public decree; for he believed heartfully in Amelia’s mission, it is worth noting, and found within her a genius that, according to his readings, was rarely exercised to such lofty ends even by those who might have possessed it. That the lingualists were the living vehicles of this genius was a precious thing, Astor maintained, even when his peers faltered; it was a thing to be protected.

As Hendrik’s voice devolved into a stream of unintelligible groans, Astor found the reality of thirty boys and thirty girls

slipping away from him. He imagined himself as a solitary being walking the uncharted deserts of the earth, his footsteps fading in the distance.

He rested his head against the bare windowsill. While a number of rooms faced the courtyard—significant for its irrigated greenery—Astor’s window faced the open space of the desert and looked upon the face of the ATLAS village. There was a synchronicity to the architecture; the buildings evinced an aspect that stated, unapologetically, that the village had not spread organically from its center over the course of centuries like the rings of an aging tree, but that it had been ever the product of some immaculate design. The most ornate buildings lined the boundaries, while the more simple boxes and domes were coddled near its center. These centrifugal aesthetics were maintained by the eponymous building at ATLAS’s very core: The Tower of ATLAS, a rectangular prism comprised entirely of glass, was transparent to the utmost, simple to a fault. A pyramidal campanile topped the structure, and it was from within this structure that—in two hours and forty-five minutes—Isadora would ring the bell summoning her fellow linguists to Assemble.

The desert blurred before Astor’s eyes; his corneas burned from the demands of consciousness. The movement of waves of sand reminded Astor somehow of his younger colleague, Laulava, and her surreptitious melodies—songs emitted in audacious bursts behind closed doors—and he wondered if a piece of music, a sound wave materialized, would look something like the Sahara, an ever-transient ephemera of crests and troughs given movement and shape by the choreographed jostling of minute grains. Astor felt calmer, sleepier, as this imaginary melody rose and fell. Five years their junior their colleague Laulava was, and yet bolder than them all, for she flouted the rules of Amelia and sang in the way the desert moved. As Astor’s eyes followed the steady rise and fall of the desert, with its crevices crisscrossing like ribbons drawn through sand, he felt keenly that his thoughts, too, had regressed into steady grooves.

Astor crossed his arms and rested them on the windowsill, his head soon following, his eyelids now rising more slowly, falling more softly...



## TIBNIYAH, EGYPT

(1 year before the establishment of ATLAS)

*By the time Astor had reached his seventh year of life, he had formed certain impressions concerning the relations of the shifting of the firmament to the steady steps of his boots upon the gravel; this made it so that he stepped always slowly, always carefully, as though his small movements had some bearing on the turning of the spheres.*

*That night came to him with the vividness of a brushstroke—black, painted stern across the center, blotting the scene in darkness and severing irrevocably its continuity. He had been lying with his back upon the sand—his features having receded considerably, a tinge of agedness jutting out through triangulated cheekbones—tracing, with his small, distinct fingers, a pattern in the air. With threads invisible, Astor sewed the net of stars into the sky; the constellations pooled back into the dark circles around his eyes, settling into these troughs, and so when he looked upon the night he did not fancy that he cried, but rather that some shiny film of starlight had settled upon his retinas.*

*All his life, Astor had filed memory upon memory into the alcoves of his mind like a network of ball-bearings, organized precariously into a delicate lattice. Now, as he moved his fingers to and fro, following the invisible threads that held the world together, he ensured that all was in place; that this, too, would pass. So intently did he wish away the feeling at the pit of his stomach—the sight of the billowing clouds that had travelled already this far from the factory smokestacks, the final screams of painful death, the vain sirens too late to alter the fact and the hopeless rumble of an engine—that he did not notice the approach of footsteps, nor did he answer immediately, to a voice that said to him, “Can I interest you in an orange?”*

*Astor shifted his gaze slowly towards the stranger; the stars hung in their paces. Every new image betokened in the lattice an evanescent flux, accompanied by the soft clanging of a thousand metal spheres that finally settled into a quiet tessellation, a conglomerate blur. So, when this simple question, “Can I interest you in an orange?” was posed to Astor within the sandy recesses of the desert, it was accompanied by the momentary chaos of metal upon metal.*

*It was Clarence who stood above him, so that young Astor, who lay on the sand sewing the stars together with his eyes, had to stand up in order to make his acquaintance. Clarence smoothed out his suit; but Astor had not noticed the wrinkles, not the dust on the cuffs of his shining white shirt nor the dirtied and dried stiffness on the rolls of his designer pants. Astor had only*

*noticed the motion, the delicate straightening of the shoulders, the slight inhale before speaking—a humble stutter, because though Clarence was older, wiser, and from a better place, humble because he was also aware that this place was not his place and that the boy who lay on the sand contemplating the stars knew far more than he himself did about lying on the sand and contemplating the stars.*

*Clarence began to peel the orange with a charming officiousness, hardly flinching even as stray juices dripped from his fingers. He then held out a silent slice for Astor, as if to repeat his offer.*

*Astor did not respond; he watched the droplets seep into sand. Each juicy bead rolled slowly on its side until it was coated with a layer of dusty grain. Though each grain looked the same, from a distance, each bore a different history—some were originally tan, and others white, while others evinced a slight shimmer that depreciated in the night. Astor knew that dust was dust and sand was sand—and that it was not a question of size but a question of nature. Dust was something that could be blown away; sand was something that settled. But Clarence could not have known this. The orange bead of juice retained its shape, for a moment. In a moment, it was gone. And still this man stood dripping in the desert, holding out his hand until it shook with the stillness of the motion.*

*“Who are you?” the young Astor inquired, and then as if the offense might have been too sudden, “I don’t know you.”*

*Clarence retracted his offer and his hand, wiping his hands on his crisp pants. It was as though he had materialized out of nowhere, to have come here offering oranges. There were no footsteps anywhere around him—that was the amazing thing about sand, to be able to see where one had been and to guess from this where one was going—but without knowledge of the one, Astor completely lacked insight into the other. Though Clarence had wiped his hands on his pants, the legs were again immaculate, as though the orange had not dripped. (Somehow, even in the night, the fruit radiated a bright color, and one felt that if only one could penetrate to the center of it, one might be sated).*

*Then Clarence continued to speak, his voice precise, a perfect balance of the vocalized consonants of the Arabic language. The insidious edges of the language curved into Clarence’s mouth, so that the voice that emanated from his throat entered the air as though it had already been a part of it—it reminded Astor of stepping into the warm water of the Tibniyah oasis, of feeling the viscosity change around his toes while the temperature pooled in his knees. That was how Clarence’s voice mingled with the air around it—as though it had already been there, just waiting to be spoken.*



*The creases in Clarence's collar melted just a bit; the words behind his throat slipped smoothly from his lips. Astor looked into the stars as Clarence asked him questions. Did Astor know he was smart?; no he did not, had never had a reason to know. Did Astor recognize that his language skills were admirable, his reading skills impeccable?; no, he had never had any basis for comparison. Had he ever considered learning how to write; no, what use would that be, when nobody he knew could read? And his parents; there had been an accident. Beyond this he could not say. That his parents would not emerge from the blaze that consumed the factory, sending its glow into the night beneath the cliff where Clarence had accosted him...*

*Astor mumbled something, a baby, "My sister wants my mom; she does not like it at the neighbors"; she cries at the toy lions and nobody sleeps..." But beyond this he could not say.*

*"And so you are alone?" That morning, Astor had not been alone; but now, he stopped threading the stars into a neat row, and they fell from the sky as the string dangled, dropping one by one like beads.*

*"I'm very capable," and it was true. Astor nodded at his own assertion; as if this concluded it.*

*"You are alone?" The question came again; it would keep coming. This moment would not pass, would echo into further moments, and Astor had not taken this man's hand before but looked at it now, hanging limp at its side, pink and human with the veins brimming near the tips. Astor had never learned that it was shameful to cry, but somehow he knew it to be true. He followed this man out of the desert. Behind him, starry beads dissolved into the sand like drops of orange.*



A gust of wind swept through the desert, and Astor was awoken by a spray of sand scattering over his face. He awoke neither to thoughts of Clarence nor to the world of an orange; he did not walk alone through an uncharted desert; the reality of thirty boys and thirty girls returned to him.

The glass skyscraper—the Tower of ATLAS—beckoned his attention. A dim five o'clock effulgence highlighted certain things above others; the windows shone (for that was the beauty of glass, in this that it showed no age and bore no wrinkles) reflecting light as if from nowhere, animated from beneath. The tower gave the impression of transparency—of pure, unadulterated crystalline

clarity—and yet, try as he might, Astor could not see through to its center. Even his familiar office of the *Global Department of Print Media of Daily and Monthly Occurrences* on the penultimate floor evinced some alien aspect now, seen through the inhuman eyes of unsanctioned wakefulness.

(Hendrik's heavy breath, whirring in the room next door, interrupted his thoughts. Astor was again faced with the reality of insurmountable nights—and why were the walls so thin after all, and weren't they old enough, now, to deserve even this privacy?)

...But then, what was that, standing near the edge of the rising sun?

At first it appeared to be nothing, just the broken movements of sand swirling slightly above the surface—the solid world evaporating into granules. But, as the sun rose somewhere else, a faded light illuminated the crystals and Astor observed four thin, knobbed stalks sticking straight up out of the sand. The stalks supported a fleshy, horizontal burden—in the dark, this fleshy splotch looked almost like a hole of black suspended beneath the sky, and Astor wondered that something might disappear into it here in the silence. But, as the four stalks crisscrossed one upon the other, the mass moved forward. As the silhouette became clearer, Astor noticed that it had not one hump, but two, as though something from within it had struck one blow, and then a second. Astor curled into the couch, half-asleep, and watched these two humps trudge lazily along as the night proceeded onward.

At some moment between full sleep and full wakefulness, he felt a jolt and his eyes opened wide. The creature had bent time, had arrived far down its course from where Astor had perceived it last, and now the red-brick sun carved an eerie outline around this camel's mouth—for now the creature was near, and now bore a name, and a genealogy. Its dumb smile looked almost sinister, glowing there for no one. All was held in abeyance; nothing was certain. Nothing, until the sun rose behind it, and with nothing in the wide desert to mute its light, wafted the night away with one grand gesticulation. The camel became nothing but a night-black shape in the rising day...

Astor waited, now wide-awake, watching through the window until the sand was drenched with day completely. And just as he scoured the horizon for the shape of a lazy camel supported by four crisscrossed legs, he must have nodded off, for when he



opened his eyes again, he had lost it. Now the rustling of the day would begin; now Astor would try his pillow again. And once there, he wondered to himself: had he seen anything at all?

Astor slept as the sun rose. Forty-seven minutes until Amelia would convene her Assembly and deliver her news; forty-seven minutes, and yet the passing of the time was no longer material to Astor, for he was fast asleep. As his eyes darted back and forth beneath his lids, something of the camel's smile seemed to linger above his dreams, wafting into this crevice and that, sinisterly, coloring the familiar scenes in its animal image.

Natalia does penance for an unpardonable offense

Hailing from a world such as ours—a world distinct from the midnight sandscape in which we find Natalia now—one forgets that a starker darkness reigns in the desert than that which daily blights our urban thoroughfares. In the desert, where no electricity blares for hundreds of miles, there is a peculiar absence of the hum of machinery and a sad lack of the glow of streetlights. The pathways wind tortuously through the dunes, unpeopled; the sole activity of the nighttime is the galing of the wind. And one feels, unremittingly, the silence—the imperforate austerity of the senses begs the contemplation of a primitive residue.

Nothing moves; time stops; a lantern sways. The neo-Gothic lines of the women's residence are illuminated in turns as Natalia scans the foyer for footsteps; spires as of a church rise from atop the structure, condensing the moonlight into streams that trickle through the grooves. And Natalia, through the arch of a wooden doorway, inspects the moonbeams on the stairs inside for evidence of disruption. She anticipates Laulava's footsteps, rushing across the floor in tacit acceptance of their tardiness, but there are no footsteps, and no evidence of clammy hands. Not a sound is heard—and one can only wait so long—until Natalia steels her resolution and secures the door behind her.

Her movements betray a determination rarely observed in a young woman of seventeen, and the little kerosene flame casts a shadow of her figure upon the ornate lattice-work that lines the arch over the doorway; her small features, exceedingly pale in normal light, are rendered sallow by the reflection of the lamp. We follow Natalia to the small patch of grass behind the residence. There, a bevy of donkeys now grazes.

Each fur-lined head lifts as she passes into their circle, but

one head lifts above all the rest, and it is he—Xanquarius, of the damaged left eye and the thinning mane—who is chosen from the pack. He addresses Natalia with a melancholy nod—only Natalia, for she is alone, and Laulava has forgotten to come down the stairs. The swaying palm leaves cast a shadow on exactly one half of Xanquarius’s face in a most singular configuration; his one eye that could not see can now be seen, and the other, which could always see, is relegated to darkness.

“Chit-chit,” she whispered—a cue heeded by Xanquarius, who lazily dragged his load—now pails, mops, a slew of pallid-looking rags, as well as the young woman who carried them—along the gravel path. It would have looked a ghost world, this town, had anyone known of it who was not a part of it; a conglomerate of geometrically disparate shadows mingling on a sandy landscape that, by all officially documented flight patterns, was bare.

The pair—the donkey and his vehicular burden—rounded the corner past the dome of the Dining Hall. This adobe structure matched the hue of the sand so exactly that it seemed to have been borne spontaneously from beneath it. It was the closest of the buildings to the Residence Halls, and was equidistant from the linguists’ places of living and their place of work.

Natalia stopped here and ventured one last glance—still no Laulava—as she saw that the distant spires of the twin Residence Halls now stripped the moon into two distinct fragments that hung in the sky like serrated discs. It was at this moment—some time slightly after Astor had exchanged the comfort of his bed for his armchair, some time slightly before Ezdehar would turn in her sleep, dreaming of doves in Florence—that Natalia disembarked from her donkey-cart at the entrance to the marbled courtyard of the Main Complex. The courtyard extended several yards around the edges of the sprawling structure—as with the case of a smaller rectangle placed within the outline of a larger one—and it was within the inner pocket of this fortress that the Assembly was to be held that morning; it was upon this floor that Natalia was to apply the services of mop and water in penance for an unpardonable offense. For she had been found with Laulava and Nemesia—Laulava humming a humorous limerick—and she had thrown back her head, and laughed.

And yes, Natalia knew better; she was incorrigible, as they

said, and accounted for her official Reprimands as merciful exchanges for the liberties that she took with them. But even Laulava had gone too far, Natalia was ready to admit, her singing into the oasis like that, the cattails waving behind her; and then there was little Nemesia, not more than five years old, tossing globules of sandballs into the water, thereby broadcasting their transgression.

Xanquarius brayed and hawed in an attempt to plead for himself one small liberty. Natalia unhitched his saddle from the cart. His desires were so simple, so easily gratified. He looked back at her approvingly, with eyes that did not analyze everything to a withered stump and with a head that did not spin with ethnographies and ruminations. At once he sauntered away, hardly conscious of the fortuitous mode of his existence, and Natalia turned her thoughts to the tile floor. The sun had only barely begun to illuminate the larger contours of the building's stone arches, and the lines that distinguished one beige marble floor tile from the next were yet only vague adumbrations.

As Natalia cleared another patch of tiles—meticulously guiding the rag along the crevices—the plops of dirty water reminded her auditorially of her offense, which—having seemed so worthwhile at the time—struck her in this new light as terribly frivolous.

Inadvertently, she hummed Laulava's tune from yesterday to herself as she scrubbed. The progression of these musical notes added a certain narrative stream to the repetitive task of scrubbing and wringing and wiping; what's more, it distracted the thoughts, sent them through channels like droplets in grout.

One wonders if young Natalia recalled the ATLASian dictates against music as she flouted them, that night, or if she was so inured to contrariness that her rebellion was a comfortable habit more than it was a thrilling extrusion? In order to understand the cascade of Natalia's thoughts, we must note that ATLAS was built on one bedrock philosophy, with one purpose, and that paramount to this purpose was one certitude: That humming leads to tonality, tonality to melody, melody to harmony, harmony to phrases—sentences—lyrics! Lyricism; the mystical ware peddled by Thomas Mann's Mephistopholes; that most pernicious succubus of the senses and romancer of the emotional palette; the pinnacle of moral decrepitude! Language at ATLAS was to be

spoken, not sung, and sentences were to be strung along one after another without flourishes of any kind. Only thus could Amelia be sure of their loyalty and their neutrality—that they would accumulate no culture of any kind, including her own—that they would pass knowledge from their right hands to their left as though nothing but cold logic and rationality interposed between. So it is that we conclude that Natalia, humming as she moved her lantern out of the way of the encroaching puddle of soapy water, committed a grave offense.

A far-off rustling gave her pause; she looked behind her, guilty. The lantern cast an eerie glow over the early morning chastity of marble; her humming came to a sudden and instinctive end. But the rustling was only Xanquarius, far off in the distance, thrashing the oasis grass with his nose. Think of it, Amelia catching her singing during a punishment for singing—a Reprimand upon a Reprimand!

Natalia looked up again to watch Xanquarius padding through the oasis at the northeastern corner, where false shrubs obscured the insurmountable concrete walls that kept the village hermetically isolate. Suddenly everything seemed sharper, brighter—this world seemed unreal for a moment, and in the stars were waves that interfered to cancellation, melding crests and troughs that amounted, once aggregated, to nothing at all; to a rope that, pulled taut in opposite directions, carried the energy to animate the universe. She was overcome with the distinct sense that an infinite of realities existed but a magnificent cancellation had rendered only this one apparent. But the opening of the slits at a single point, the entering of light—it allowed for not just one wave pattern, but thousands; it opened the world to infinity (the sun began to rise and the arches cast neat shadows on the courtyard). She had known astronomy—had helped a blind old man write it in notebooks—but now she was not allowed wave probabilities, was refused science.

As the water meandered down in paths and her muscles grew tired, the sun began to rise and she remembered that it had a light that did not diminish of itself as it reflected... but it had been at least eight years (and she had then only been a child of nine) since she had read a scientific text, since she had worked with the old man. There was nothing left now, in here, of Poland and the rest; she remembered only reading a book, watching a

coffin float down the driveway, and being carried by Clarence away from that towards this. And how was it possible? How many times could she nurse the exact same image?



## POZNAN, POLAND

(2 years after the establishment of ATLAS)

*It can be accounted for by a temporary suspension of the laws of physics—by the grief-stricken mind’s tendency towards fancy—that, on the day of the old man’s death, Natalia distinguished the echoing sounds of the shuffling of pages through the heavy wooden planks of her bedroom floor. She paced back and forth in the windowless room, searching in the creaking of the floorboards for a conventional rhythm. She made this noise, in part, to drown out the profanatory sound of books dragged back and forth in the room below.*

*There was something garish in the stream of opportunism that had accompanied the old man’s demise. Mathematicians, astronomers, physicists—theorists of all sorts—had swarmed the old man’s study only hours after the cold hand of death had had him relinquish it. Like locusts, these academics picked apart already the recorded remains of what could so recently have been described as an acutely active mind.*

*Only minutes after the old man’s death had been confirmed and his body carried out on a plastic board, the attending doctor called out to Natalia—while he held the makeshift stretcher firmly with one hand—that someone would be by soon to get her; that she would not be left alone to tumble about the ratty wooden shack, unsupervised and unattended to. Such a procedure was undertaken, the doctor explained, in all cases wherein a guardian was rendered unable (and death marked the most extreme of inabilities) to provide for his charge.*

*This prophecy had been delivered to Natalia that morning. Now it was evening, and still no one had come for her. The intermittent ringing of the doorbell—which drew many more visitors now, in the old man’s absence—only betokened more mathematicians, more astronomers, more physicists. They had appointed the old man’s study their nucleus, and they fanned out from this central point in in a futile search for wayward proofs scrawled onto kitchen towels or astronomical sketches engraved into bathroom mirrors. Drawers creaked open; cabinets clicked. Natalia received this sudden profusion of the sounds of her house with great perplexity. For this reason, she chose to remain in her room until the madness had settled. This respite came only*

at the end of the evening, when the maid returned and swept these wayward mathematicians back into the study, closing the door behind them.

“You may copy whatever you need, and you may stay as late as you like, but you are not to bother the girl,” she told them.

The old man had been famed for his eccentricities throughout his life, but had never been respected for his intellect until that morning—the morning of his passing. He had been an impoverished, dedicated academic who frequented his personal library more than his bedroom and could be found asleep more often in his study than in his bed. As for Natalia’s room, he had only entered once—to show her its location—during her four-year residence in the worn mansion.

These private quarters, where Natalia now measured out the creaking of the planks, were just hardly sufficient. One small lamp lit the entire room only meekly; one wooden nightstand had long since lost a leg, so that anything that was placed atop it landed in a heap at the left-hand corner of its feet. Her bed—which wasn’t strictly that—had been constructed from a heavy, long bag that was stuffed with her own clothing, so that its contents had to be shifted and reconstituted every time a piece of its padding chanced to be removed for the purposes of wearing. By the end of each week, this “mattress” grew thin—this tapering subsisted until the washing of clothes, at which time its structure was reinvigorated, and Natalia enjoyed again a full night’s sleep upon a density of clothesstuffs.

Yes, there was a certain ugliness to Natalia’s room, an offense against which the old man did not provide. But then, he cannot entirely be held to account for his neglect: for the fact is that the old man, who had long past sustained an injury, was blind.

Natalia paced—sat—paced—sat—until a doorbell interrupted her inconstant rhythm. She remembered, then, that the responsibility fell upon her to tend to the visitor; for who else in the house was there to do it who was not already busy sifting through matters of the earth and the heavens?

So Natalia answered the door. She found, on its other end, a young man in a lightly soiled suit, his pants creased to perfection.

Clarence’s gaze fixated instinctively on an empty space at least two feet above the head that greeted him—but when no taller person materialized, he was compelled to deal with the shorter one: a young girl who looked up at him, too conspicuously cognizant of her own actions for a child, too desperately hospitable for an adult.

“I’m Natalia. You may come in if you’d like,” she said. “The other mathematicians are in the study. If you go, I think the maid says you have to stay there.” She pointed to the study with her small white hand, extending her



*fingers as much as was possible.*

*The furnishings were sparse; the atmosphere overcast. Clarence wished to attribute this gloom to the old man's recent passing, but he sensed irrevocably that it was not so. An uncomfortably low-hanging, dingy chandelier was the sole remnant of decor in the hobbling mansion; its once-sharp crystals were now dulled by aged layers of dust. Clarence hesitated to walk onward; for even in India, where he had collected Avi, there had been the majesty of the green hills to comfort the soul, and the smell of verdure to remind one of life. But there was something about Europe, about Poland—something about the sinuous driveway and the decaying mansion—that chilled his nerves.*

*"My name is Clarence," he said, removing his suit-jacket and folding it over his left arm. "And I'm not a mathematician. I've come to talk to you."*

*"They said you might be coming," Natalia said, her small voice suffused with resignation.*

*"They...?" Clarence stared blankly at Natalia. He plunged onward. "I thought you might show me the house."*

*Clarence soon found himself eventually in a large octagonal room which was overgrown, in all manner of speaking, with books. "I'm very interested in old houses," Clarence continued, projecting artificially from that part of the speech palate that is reserved for prevarication. The skylight illuminated the dust in a single beam that crashed through the center of the room.*

*The library betrayed a curious lack of shelves. The immediate impression was one of slovenly intellectual excess—of an academic mind having dispensed with the whims of social decorum—and as Clarence navigated a path through the leaning stacks of books scattered about the room, he felt as though he negotiated his way through a field of overgrown weeds.*

*A small space had been cleared somewhere near the middle; a small lamp shone over a tiny wooden chair. A larger, worn armchair was tucked into a shadow, its cushion permanently sunken from the weight of an old man's thoughts. Natalia winced perceptibly as Clarence eyed the seat.*

*By now, Clarence had learned to recognize that particular expression, wherever it came: the realization of a sudden vacancy, the onslaught of new thoughts that filled the space. A face under the aegis of tragedy was always contorted this way or that and had stamped upon it the cultural and racial parameters of its bearer, but underneath all of these individuations, it was the essence of something that stood out just the same. Among all other concurrent impressions, the dominant timbre was one of empty space, which is everywhere just the same, a luminiferous ether.*

*"It's strange," Clarence said, "the lack of shelves." He lifted a handful of books from the stack nearest his elbow and surveyed the spines. "I suppose*



*books on shelves are more of a visual flourish than anything else; it's not often that one reads old books, especially when one is in the habit of acquiring new ones. And, after all, is it not true that the old man could not see?" He returned the books carefully to the pile, as though they had been part of some system after all.*

*"Oh, that's not true here. I mean, yes, he had lost his sight, but that was not always the case. After that, I read them all to him—many times. He kept them for me on the shelves and for himself in his mind." It was, Natalia had thought then for the first time, as though a whole library had met its death. "Would you like me to read to you?" Natalia asked.*

*"Excuse me?"*

*"You say you're no astrophysicist and no mathematician, and that's all right. But I might read to you if there's something you'd like to have read."*

*"Absolutely," Clarence said. "I've heard great things about your reading; that's why I came."*

*"I'll leave it to you to choose the book..." she granted.*

*Clarence pulled a thin volume—a collection of Japanese folktales—from the stack, and the two sat down to the task. Natalia's little body suddenly transformed, her shoulders slumped, her eyes sparkled and grew wider with infused energy, and she took to her reading with an emotion that overcame the gloom that seemed to hang over the rest of the house.*

*Clarence reached out his hand and gently closed the book that Natalia held; it would behoove him to take some notes on her pronunciation, to conduct a more trenchant analysis of her linguistic aptitude, he knew, but visions of a little girl rattling about a large house eclipsed his good sense.*

*A book lay half-open on the nightstand, face-down. "What's this one?" Clarence asked.*

*"That's 'Abdullah the Merman.'"*

*"Do you like it?"*

*"We didn't finish it," she finally answered, realizing only now that she referred to a "we" that now only half existed.*

*"Sit here." Clarence shifted his body to the edge of his own chair; Natalia's equanimity gave way for a moment, and she wedged her body slowly and awkwardly into the little space at Clarence's side. Her straight brown hair fell forward in two sets, curtaining her face on both sides.*

*Clarence adjusted the lamp so that its halo now projected over the both of them, packed into the small chair. He picked up 'Abdullah the Merman' and read from the marked spot:*

*Abdullah the Merman moved rapidly through the*

*water, weaving through schools of fish. Abdullah the Fisherman, unused to his tail, followed his companion haltingly. Abdullah the Merman led Abdullah the Fisherman through emerald-studded lands relegated only to women, to palaces whose turrets reached almost to the surface of the water.*

*After some time, the Fisherman questioned the Merman, 'But Abdullah, my dear friend and trusted companion, you have not yet shown me where you live. Where you have kept your wife and your children, those loved ones to whom you have fed the fruit and the bread that I have brought you here from land day by day?'*

*So Abdullah the Merman led the Fisherman through a landscape that changed all the while. The buildings became smaller and the riches more remote, until they arrived at an area dotted with caves. The Merman led the Fisherman to his modest seaweed-hung abode, where the seven figures of his wife and his children came out to greet the Fisherman.*

*'It is strange,' the Fisherman said, 'that we are so similar, and yet I shall die if I stay too long in the water and you shall die if you step onto the land.'*

*'It is indeed a shame,' the Merman replied, 'and for one reason most of all.'*

*'What reason is that?' the Fisherman asked him. 'If you have some desire, please do share; you helped me in my time of need, and I am glad to repay the kindness.'*

*'I would like to go visit the tomb of the Prophet,' Abdullah the Merman told him. 'For we are all sons of Adam, and yet that pleasure is denied me. You may go there, and yet you squander your time underwater with me; you think your debt to me is greater than your debt to the Prophet, even though we are all sons of Adam, and Allah is bountiful, and we must always be conscious of that debt. So please, go, and place these gems on the gravestone of the Prophet, and pray there on my behalf.'*

*Abdullah the Fisherman agreed heartily, welcoming the opportunity to fulfill this wish. Just then, sounds of raucous merrymaking reached them through the water. 'What is that? A celebration?' the Fisher-*

man asked the Merman.

‘Oh that,’ the Merman said, ‘must be the evidence of a death.’

‘But such a feast, such happiness, at the death of a beloved countryman?’ the Fisherman inquired, confused.

The Merman replied, ‘By this you seem surprised. Is this not how death is treated in the land in which you live?’

‘Most certainly not,’ the Fisherman replied. ‘We weep and mourn and feel all manner of sadness. We eat little and we pray much and we lament the loss of so loved a one.’

The Merman looked suddenly cold and unfriendly. ‘You must go now. I end our companionship here. I have no desire to associate with you any further.’ ‘

‘Why?’ the Fisherman asked. ‘Have I done something to insult you and your people?’

‘We are all sons of Adam,’ the Merman replied, ‘and just as I gave you a deposit to place on the Prophet’s grave, Allah has given a human soul as a deposit to us on earth, from which He will exact this deposit on the death of the body, and the soul shall be returned to him. It is an occasion of celebration. But you, if you grieve so readily at the loss of this deposit, this soul, how can I trust that you will be able to part with this deposit, of money, which I have entrusted you to give to the Prophet? No, the chance cannot be taken. Our acquaintance must end here...’

*Natalia had fallen asleep on Clarence’s lap. He did not wake her, even when his legs pained from the weight of her body, even when she began to mumble incoherently, something about cheese—but that did not make sense, and Clarence concluded that he too must have fallen victim to a delirious fatigue. The following morning, Clarence took Natalia to the ATLAS village; just minutes after they departed from the house, the village government arrived with the intent to remove the young girl from the premises. To their horror, they found there no young girl there to remove.*



As it neared five o'clock, Natalia looked out onto the vast courtyard. Xanquarius had wandered back, and his movements were viscid with a contented languor. As Natalia knelt on the cold marble and swept her hand over the surface, she pronounced it clean—she deemed her night a success.

And this might have been all; at least Natalia might have been allowed this small satisfaction in a day that would offer her no other. But O! If only the hope of escape could be eradicated in the imagination as it is in fact!

A sudden gust of wind rends the desert's peace. A wave of sand blows into the courtyard, settling into the crevices that have been so recently brushed clean. The sound of approaching hooves grows louder; Natalia looks up to see a startled Xanquarius loping in her direction, shimmying his graceless body through a too-narrow path between the two pails—one full of dirty water, one now empty. Both containers fall recklessly at his sides as he stumbles past. The empty pail sends a minute trickle of clean water down the sandy expanse of marble while the pail of dirty water gushes forth shamelessly and drowns the trickle in a deluge. In moments, the white marble is overcome by a deep brown sediment that trickles in a path to Natalia's bent knees, so that when she stands up, with hands still dry, she feels the vestiges of water tracing the bones of her ankles.

Once, once, Natalia had had her thumb upon the cosmos; had sat in a small chair and processed thoughts that spanned the universe. She had sat, flitting like a mayfly amongst books of all colored bindings with an old man who was blind to the colors of the world; an old man who perceived instead an entropic hole, bathed in black, saw every speck of disorder possible within a space, who saw every way in which a thing could be disordered; every way in which it could exist. But Amelia thought she could fight entropy; thought that all things could tend towards order under her hand. It was the one-to-one correspondence she cultivated—where one statement could be so articulate and so precise as to have only one interpretation; and then there was art: one thing, so precise and confined, and yet a million interpretations could be piled atop it. It created entropy so that elsewhere there could be order; Amelia intended to create order, inadvertently ensuring that elsewhere, there was chaos.

Now forty-five minutes remain until the Assembly; the job

can be finished, but not in the way that Natalia has hoped; and on this, rests everything. As she haphazardly wipes away the sediment, not bothering to replenish the pail with a new water, she curses herself, and Amelia, and the whole enterprise—everyone but the donkey, who stands there, half-blind, being a beast and knowing no better.

[3]

## Ezdehar and the Assembly

Once Ezdehar opened her eyes—through no effort of her own—she conflated somehow the hue of the wall's burnt sienna with the scent of jasmine flowers that permeated the room; she associated this, in turn, with the uncurtained sunlight that fell upon her left cheek, stinging it uniformly in an infinity of infinitesimal strokes.

The sun rose differently here. In London, it appeared slowly, hesitantly, and yet never completely, wondering at its own existence; in Costa Rica it burst from the sky and showered on the earth from every which end, so that one never knew where it came from or where it went, but only that it did come from a place and did return to another; in Florence it emerged shamefully, damaged, on the tail of a wretched haze that hung over drunken alleys. The air of Italy was too sodden for the writing of masterpieces. But here, so far north of the Sahel wilderness and so far south of the Mediterranean Sea, the sunlight did not wear itself away on its descent. It did not shine through a dreadful miasma of generations misspent; it fell upon the town of ATLAS uninhibited, relentless.

What a horror to be awoken when one has not yet decided to go to sleep! Little Nemesis's footsteps padded up and down the hallway. The first to sense the anomaly in the routine of the morning (and the first to profit from it), Nemesis had taken it upon herself to set the corridor of the Administrative Residence racing with her tread; Amelia's stern glance, drawing her exuberant daughter back, was nearly an audible thing, perceived even through closed doors. As for Clarence, Ezdehar could be certain he was not yet ready; he would set his tie just so and starch the edges of his collar—and, by some miracle, even in the sweltering heat of the Sahara he would not sweat any more than if he

had wandered into a temperate board rooms in New York City. Ezdehar drew some comfort (and the soft beckoning of sleep?) from the knowledge that Meryem—the village doctor occupying the nearest room—had not yet begun her morning ritual, for the sounds of plumbing in the rambling residence put forth a sound like a focused deluge of many arms, and, as yet, the pipes in the scaffolding remained silent.

Ezdehar pulled the duvet over her head, closing her eyes to a final wisp of sleep that fluttered like a feather, dipping and downing just above her reach. In her semi-consciousness, she contorted her body in a very particular way so as not to disturb the objects that shared her bed: for there, where she might have extended her arm farther or rolled over on her side to shield her left cheek from the sun, was wedged a rather shoddily-kempt yellow notepad. Something—but even this, something quite meager—had been scribbled between its lines and then scuffed out again. The pages empty, always empty, and she forever locked in a cycle of waking and sleeping... The pad awaited fruitlessly its masterpiece.

The sun cast upon these pages the intricate shadow of the steel curlicues of Ezdehar's window, and this, this convection of light and decor, was the first intrusion of the morning of the Assembly into Ezdehar's private world.

In a half hour's time, Ezdehar swept through the lobby of the Administrative Residence, where an ornate roof—displaced from a Gothic Revival church and transported here—seemed distended beyond its usual capacity, and the barrel vaulted ceiling evinced a grandeur which struck Ezdehar, even now, as sublimely beautiful. Dark walnut wooden benches faced the center of the room and faced each other, as though locked in an endless stalemate of question and answer to which no question was ever posed and no answer was ever offered. Ezdehar left these benches to their *tete-a-tete* as she slammed the door behind her, glancing back only briefly, wishing for only a moment that she was anywhere else.

The edifice as a whole, named the Administrative Residence by the powers vested in Amelia, was diminutive—no larger than a two-story, medium-sized English country home—despite the ponderous self-importance that parts of its decor seemed designed to convey. A wide, curving staircase with ornate iron furnishings led down from the floor of modestly furnished bed-



rooms to what was essentially a foyer that occupied the entire first floor. Sunlight entered only in ornate patches, filtered through dark stained glass; through an open front door, the village outside looked warmer, softer—as though in the foyer, somehow, one had become stuck in time.

Ezdehar gazed back through the doorway from the outside as she unshackled her distinctive white horse from its enclosure and thought it a quaint little life, in some respects; and yet, if one were to think of it another way, a life shamelessly, artificially cosmopolitan.

Ezdehar walked her horse to the chain-link fence—a final marker of inveterate power rendered material—and unlocked the padlock before mounting her transport. Let it be known that Amelia's attempts at decorative irrigation had been mildly fruitful here, and she had encouraged the growth of scanty bits of moss and ivy to mitigate the harshness of the metal boundary. This proverbial moat, separating administrative lives from utilitarian ones, had suffered attempts at infiltration during the earlier stages of ATLAS; following one heroic success, however, it came to be known that not much of interest occurred on the other side, besides Clarence stretching his neck up and from side to side like a curious bird in front of his bathroom mirror in pursuit of a fastidious shave, and a small baby that seemed enamored of its newfound (and, might they add, prodigious) verbal abilities. Attempts at scaling the fence fell out of favor, and the foliage grew thick.

Ezdehar galloped along the path in the direction of the Main Complex, overcome with the sense that everything that morning moved in a dramatic choreography—a performance of life, which was not wholly disagreeable: Linguists could be seen on their various pathways—they distributed themselves amongst the donkey carts into the usual clans of three or four, their white sun-cloaks unwrinkled and flapping out at the sides. The donkey carts were superfluous—for that matter, technically, so was Ezdehar's horse—for the village only spanned a handful of miles in any direction, and the preponderance of less frequented areas—the oasis, the infirmary, and the planting grounds—was such that the distance travelled on any given morning was less than a single mile.

The pathways ran between those places Amelia wished them to go, and each was angled particularly so that the order



in which each building was to be visited in the course of a day formed the most efficient paths (one could, with equal certainty, track Leopold Bloom's day in Dublin). If one wanted to move from the ATLAS Tower to the Main Complex, for example, one had to move south towards the residences and again fork north and traverse the same distance just traversed, finally forming a half-circle around the ATLAS Tower simply to enter the Main Complex at its only opening, the iron gate of the amphitheater—how much easier it was to pass through Ezdehar's office, just east of the Tower, offer a quick greeting at this fortuitous waystation, and walk the few yards from her back exit to the Main Complex gate!

As Ezdehar's horse cut between the various paths, it kicked up violent puffs of sand; she wrapped her scarf more tightly around her face as a shield, covering even the eyes, and through this lightly translucent white material she perceived the sunlight as a particulate thing, and it lent a fantastical air to the events of the journey, as though she watched this very regular event through the eyes of an older version of herself; through the scarf, she beheld the woven pathways coming first apart and then together like threads of frayed rope in a dreary hopscotch; the donkey carts that carried the lingualists snaked closer together and then apart, and then again together, marking out a staccato rhythm to the morning chatter. And yet, amidst this dramatic poetry, one fact was not lost to Ezdehar: she counted seven donkey-carts in motion, which left four lingualists unaccounted for. Either they had arrived early—which was both propitious and unlikely, for she knew who the missing parties were—or they would be incurably late.

Some combination of this concern, the scarf obscuring the clarity of her vision, and the general surreality of the morning sun brought her horse nearly to collision with one of her charges, who stood in a patch of sand triangulated by three pathways, lackadaisically tossing and catching a blue handball. His brown-blond hair hung over his forehead and his sun-cloak, discovered by a wind, flapped aside to reveal a well-formed torso defined beneath a white t-shirt.

“Hendrik!” Ezdehar pinched down only the part of the scarf that covered her eyes—for this forced encounter had sent up enormous ruffles of dust—and so Hendrik was confronted with

two kind brown eyes that peered curiously at him from atop the horse. “You’re aware you’re not supposed to be idling...”

Hendrik’s features seemed to bleed into one another—it did not seem to matter whether one focused on the ears that protruded perfectly on each side beside the blond stubble of his beard or whether one turned the curve from his jaw to the beginnings or the ends of his lips—his teeth looked small in his mouth, as though inserted into his expression long after the rest had already been complete, and he had a single dimple on the left side of his face, though there was hardly occasion for one to notice this in the generally imposing terrain of his face.

Hendrik leaned in (and up) playfully towards Ezdehar and whispered, “I am aware I am not to be *openly* idling.”

Ezdehar—paralyzed by a conflict of interest and duty—said nothing. But then, Hendrik’s eyes fluttered to the sky in the distance; Ezdehar turned and noted the rustling of a white curtain in Amelia’s bedroom window. This was the cause of Hendrik falling to his knees and digging a small cradle in the sand to cloak his blue handball for the duration of the Assembly.

Ezdehar recalled that as a child, Hendrik had often forgotten where he had squirreled these away, and Clarence—who demonstrated an admirable investment in this particular child—bought a storehouse of identical blue handballs that he planted for Hendrik in likely burial spots. To this day, she waited for a giant wind to blow ATLAS away and to reveal that the whole enterprise was balanced upon a thinly veiled landscape of little blue handballs.

“Time to go,” Hendrik said, having done with his makeshift burial. He then took off running in the direction of the Main Complex—forgoing the donkey cart and relying instead on his hulking invincibility, he demonstrated yet again that he was unto himself a machine entire.

Sitting atop her horse and following slowly the trail by which Hendrik had bolted towards the iron gate, Ezdehar lamented for a moment that she could not inspire the sort of fear or command from them, the sort of authority that Amelia could muster by the mere rustling of a white curtain in a window nearly half a mile and a chain-link fence away.

In an attempt at utter artistic objectivity, Amelia had fashioned—

quite officially, with black and pencil sketches on light blue graph paper—a village of eclectic architecture. Instead of choosing one particular style, one privileged area, she “chose all of them” (as she put it always, with a stern flourish of her arm, as though this were obvious, as though it were the only way). The Administrative Residence was modeled after the Frankenstein castle in Germany, the Infirmary (outfitted with a trusted and single-minded doctor, Meryem) was a veritable miniaturature of the Japanese Himeji castle, and the Dining Hall was arrayed with stacked domes of the Turkish variety. Of course, these were not considerations that Amelia made public to the lingualists (one is best protected, after all, when one is unaware of the need for protection). Amelia hoped that her lingualists retained only one idea, egalitarian at its core and draconian in its execution: that no one culture was superior to any other; that the difference between one building and another, between that cornice and this portico, were mere symbols of physical variety to be remarked at in no way at all. She hoped that the lingualists themselves would resist, nay, recoil at the opportunity to accumulate any material culture of their own—and that if their own integrity failed this test of elasticity, a tensile bed of rules and regulations would restore their anonymity, reinvigorate their commitment to the particular brand of timeless and spaceless human intelligence that she had taken such great pains to inculcate here.

Amelia need not have worried herself so extremely on this point; the lingualists, at all stages of their development, had failed to recognize any grand differences between the structures that inhabited their village—but we cannot judge their aesthetic senses so harshly on this point. The fact was that Amelia had hired a British architect to help her and that the architect, being herself British, naturally saw the world through British eyes and penned a village through British hands, thus creating a village that was most British in character. And, even after years had coated the stone and brick and mortar with specks of tan-brown sand, something distinctly British shone still thorough the curvature of the edges and the sweeping of the roofs.

Ezdehar entered the amphitheater to a sparse collection of bodies, scattered along the benches and the walls, their eyes darting—from time to time—to the podium where Amelia would soon stand, their ears poised to the sky where—any moment

now—a bell was to ring.

The peal of a bell had a singular effect upon the people of ATLAS; as soon as the mallet hit the brass, the human composition of the Main Complex re-organized itself into neat columns and rows, spilling into the benches in predictable formations—subject to implicit social contracts as incontrovertible as the laws of electromagnetism that dictate the arrangement of metal shavings in a field.

Zixin, of the *Department for the Housing and Curating of Literary Documents*, took his seat near his colleagues of the same department, though he sat with his thin shoulders high, as a bird ready to take off, and though he spoke to no one; Natalia sprung up from her spot amongst her comrades from the *Department of Sociological and Anthropological Texts of the General Humanities*—where she had been biding her time collapsed into a half-recumbent formation, her head resting sleepily on her arms. She jumped from the third seat to the ground and ran to the special seat set aside for her punishment (a gentle metaphorical pillory, if you will, though in all manner of visuals no different from a regular metal chair). Avi, of the *Department of Religious Documents on Spiritual Thoughts*, regarded her out of the corner of his eye—painfully now, though once it had not been so between them—and took no note of the chattering gaggle of the close-knit colleagues of the *Global Department of Print Media of Daily and Monthly Occurrences*, who appeared not quite as cohesive as they might have been had Astor kept to his timetable and made a punctual appearance. As for the lingualists of the *Department of Texts That Have Proven to be of Educational Use and Interest*, it was assumed that they would sit at the center, so Hendrik, his body sweaty from the run, parted a sea of flinching lingualists as he made his way to his seat. Hendrik patted on the shoulder Jabari, a young man of the *Department of Scientific and Mathematical Proofs*, not so much because they were friends, but largely because they were not—merely players in a longitudinally persisting, adolescent cat-and-mouse pecking order that would define their relation forever. Hendrik at last took his seat somewhere near Natalia. At their feet sat the youngest recruits, chattering away amongst themselves, for they were still within their first two years of Translation Training and had not yet entered the departments of their choosing.

The lingualists, self-segregated into their disciplinary cir-

cles, presented a chromatic array of differently colored neck scarves (reflecting, as it were, distinctly evolved intellects). The neckscarf of the appropriate Departmental color was offered as a ceremonious token of that lingualist having been inducted forever into this particular brand of knowledge. It was the Order of Things; their very own Archaeology of the Human Sciences. To manifold benefit, the scarves had been designed by teams of Amelia's remote meteorologists and engineers who calibrated them perfectly to repel heat, deflect dust, and allow for visibility; so that to shed one's colors meant not only to suggest a sociopolitical affront, but to be subject to dehydration, respiratory distress, and partial blindness—to be as uncomfortable in the sands as is a camel without eyelashes.

Ezdehar, anxiously taking a mental roll call of the lingualists, found her count interrupted by Jabari, who stumbled frenetically through an argument for an early dismissal so that he could return to a particularly difficult mathematical proof that awaited him at his desk. His frantic fingertips poked holes through the sky and only found rest at the clanging of the gate. They all turned, awaiting Amelia.

...But it was only Clarence, bowing sheepishly as he followed an invisible line on the ground in front of him and took his seat in the most dignified of manners. Ezdehar, however, saw something in him that the lingualists did not—she detected in him now a shade of something, a spectre of a memory he would not share.

Clarence's Irish features looked ruddier than usual—his face seemed to have been painted entirely in different shades of sand. His brown hair, shadowed near the roots and golden near the edges, was arranged in bold straight lines in varied directions; his smile appeared suddenly, as though the reward of a conclusion of some puzzle, and required an unexpected rearrangement of his symmetrical features, such that the left half curled upwards to a dimple and the right side turned downward, as though his words involved always a grounding, a serious mooring to his principles upon the right side of his mouth, and yet a playful boyishness tugged at the left; a wild optimism that, in that it ever achieved only half expression, fell just short of containable. The golden tint in his face matched the brownish tint of his blond hair, so that no matter the exact hue of the sand that formed his backdrop, a part of him was camouflaged and appeared all but nonexistent. It

seemed fitting—for Clarence was overcome always by an atmosphere of restraint and only ever seemed to verbalize exactly half of what he thought. His eyebrows were never still as he spoke, but arched with every excited assertion. Now, they tended towards the middle and were held apart by three vertical wrinkles of concern.

The gate clanged; Clarence knew that Ezdehar's eyes were constantly cataloguing the behaviors of sixty individuals, and he expected constantly this intrusion. Four seats that should have been filled yet remained empty.

As Ezdehar turned back, her eye caught Zixin's. There was something very old and very melancholy in his dark black eyes. They bore into her, and Ezdehar realized then that he must have been waiting to catch her gaze for some time, that he meant to share something wordlessly with this piercing stare. But she could not unravel the message—she had only the sudden misgiving that there was something new in his soft, lightly freckled Chinese countenance.

A rattle at the gate—Ezdehar turned her head towards the amphitheater entrance, clipboard in hand, ready to admit either Astor or Laulava. Natalia sat up straight; Isadora swung her knees forward and placed the soles of her feet squarely on the ground; Hendrik ran his hand over his hair; Jabari inhaled, deeply; Zixin released a breath. The linguists perfected their postures, and waited.

When Amelia finally entered, she did so to an entirely silent amphitheater. The linguists' chatter was dampened by the metronomic tread of Amelia's footsteps; these sounds—the one receding, the other growing more urgent—were concatenated by the irregular skip-steps of her daughter, young Nemesis, whose light blue frock flapped up and down as she rushed to keep up with a pace that rendered gracefulness just slightly impossible. Nemesis cradled in her arms an aged fennec fox (of the species whose ears are most comically prominent, moreso than its limbs). Its head hung now lackadaisically over the inner crook in the young girl's elbow as it made itself available for all manner of affection.

Amelia headed in a straight line to the podium; she did not survey the audience; she looked at no one. She wanted them to look at her first, and for them to note that she herself looked farther than they could see, at some distant object that did not yet



exist. A heaviness emanated constantly from her presence, dissipating like mist, so that from the bleachers the children regarded her as one might regard a regal lioness of the wild, but so that for Ezdehar, who sat in a folding chair only feet from where Amelia now stationed herself at the podium, Amelia's imposing doggedness came in the trappings of a humanity—pale skin pulled taut at the edges of the mouth, unabashedly black hair interrupted only in the front by lone strands of white (calling to mind the process of aging, in theory if not in fruition), and green eyes that seemed to never settle on precisely on any object but always to look past all of them. In stature, Amelia was tall but slight; the weight she commanded was not exactly from age, not exactly from a scent or a din or a firmness in her face—but from something in the way she held herself. Something about her chin always slanted slightly upward, unnaturally. As though she was being watched and everything was a performance.

Amelia's young audience automatically reconstituted itself into neat lines and rows. The second row moved to fill in the empty space where Astor should have been, and the antisocial bubble of vacant seats surrounding Jabari's body was breached.

Amelia took the podium, spread her papers in front of her (they were empty). She then pulled Nemesia towards her, gesturing to a smaller chair that had been set up to her immediate right. Nemesia's eyes flitted to the appointed place, but her legs, to Amelia's disfavor, moved in quite another direction, and so the mother had to contend with the girl sprawled at the foot of the podium, playing companion to Fennecus the Fox, who roamed about her with unbridled exuberance and elicited periodic giggles from his diminutive mistress.

"I've called you all here—" Amelia began; the structure was formulaic. Amelia was indeed so imperturbable in her rhetorical routine that she was hardly discomfited when, moments later, the large gate swung open and Astor barged into the room, reddening as he took a seat at the edge of the group. He made one last effort to smooth his unironed slacks with the palms of his hands as he settled onto the bench. He leaned promptly over to Zixin to whisper anything that might give the impression of reserved nonchalance; this garnered the respect of fifty-nine pairs of eyes but the harsh admonition of one: Amelia's silent glance liquidized him on the spot. Even Ezdehar felt a chill, and she winced

inwardly on Astor's behalf, knowing that he measured himself by his success at ATLAS and that, to him, this measure was the most important thing in the world. Instinctively, Ezdehar looked to the door for the last remaining lingualist: Laulava, who had yet to arrive. Laulava was younger, Ezdehar feared, and did not have Astor's mettle for liquidizing stares.

Ezdehar did not begrudge the lingualists their blind devotion and gentle fear; though nearly five years had passed since Ezdehar had first laid eyes on Amelia, who had then been a British politician masquerading as an Italian patrician, Ezdehar remembered clearly the challenging green eyes that betokened a definitive promise. "We're not locking you in," Amelia had said. We're not locking you in. It had been so easy to say.



## FLORENCE, ITALY

(6 years after the establishment of ATLAS)

*Ezdehar had been sitting for several hours under the awning of the local playhouse, shifting her body periodically to accommodate the comings and goings of an indifferent Florentine populace. She hugged her knees to her chest in an attempt to cheat the sunlight of its ability to crisp and burn. As this sun rose to its apex—the narrow street illuminated by its melodic stillness—Ezdehar's spirit flagged under the ascent of hours.*

*She clutched a stack of flyers that announced "A Graveyard Play"; an amateurish black and white sketch of a single gravestone was emblazoned upon its center. She clutched this stack and she looked at the sky, wondering whether this point at which the sun was highest in the sky would always be so damnably perceptible. Desperately, she waved a playbill in the path of a passerby.*

*"Tonight, seven o'clock," she muttered to the stranger's receding back.*

*This distracted passerby (to his credit, never dreaming that his affront would play a part in Ezdehar's story of becoming), stumbled away without extending his hand; had he glanced back at this young woman, he might have found her eager for even brief companionship—so brief as the extending of one hand and the reaching of another—and he might have been aware that as he faded into the throng of tourists and locals, disappearing into some pocket of the winding street, he denied her this fleeting comfort.*

*As this man walked away with the cobblestones clicking against his*



heels, Ezdehar was suddenly struck by how sharp the sky looked, how plastic, as the gray-black steeples jutted into its domain. It was beautiful, she thought; and it was beautiful, what's more, that she had the great fortune to be standing there at that moment to see it, to watch a flock of white birds blown in a gust from atop the steeple point, drifting to the ground like flour sifting in the wind. It is a very strange feeling, to weep drily inside yourself, to feel the scream rising inside you as a physical thing, until it expands soundlessly in the hollow of your throat and dissolves before it alights, leaving behind an unbearably insatiate residue. She swallowed it, as she had all the others, so that inside of her lay layers of fears and misgivings, sheets of perpetually sifting sediment.

In the flock of white birds that fluttered like flour, Ezdehar saw something in that moment that was to distinguish it from other moments; she stored this also inside herself (neatly bestride the unscreamed screams), collecting the image, so that perhaps she could one day connect it to something in this moment that mattered.

These were Ezdehar's thoughts when a woman—dressed too much like an Italian, the mark of cosmopolitan foreignness—cast a shadow upon Ezdehar's again-seated form. The woman's forceful elegance, coupled with a gait that marched upon every cobblestone as though she owned it, would forever be mingled in Ezdehar's memory with the flapping of a thousand wings. The sky cleared; the sun itself began to fall.

Amelia's complexion was deeper than it would be ten years hence; but everywhere was evidence of what she would accomplish: the lines on her forehead, the way her jaw clicked with finality at the end of every sentence. At a loss, and glazed into indifference by the heat, Ezdehar dully handed Amelia a flyer. "Come see the play tonight. It is authentic Italian, at the very least." (Ezdehar had spoken in English, but when Amelia had responded in Italian, Amelia's accent had not been quite right.)

"Authentic Italian, for money paid, to be employed on a stage in Florence; while I can hear authentic Italian being played for free all around me?" When Ezdehar did not answer her, Amelia asked pointedly, "Have you seen it?" As though they were part of a performance; as though Amelia already knew how it would end.

"I wrote it," Ezdehar answered apathetically, now crumpling papers into the hands of other passerby in order to avoid speaking to this one. She did not know why she should have been afraid of Amelia's question; but no one had spoken to her so directly in weeks, and though they did not know her here, she feared that something in the shifting of her eyes or the hesitance in her gestures would betray something of her past—of the crippling failure of

*Tanzania.*

*“You wrote the play. See, that, I like being told. You should start with that,” Amelia said.*

*How could Ezdehar explain to a stranger that the words had not flowed through her; that the writing itself of this last and final play had been only imitative—imitative of herself, but imitative nonetheless—had been robotic, had not sprung from nature; that her vision had become hampered from somewhere deep within and that bottlenecks of words stuck in her pen, the hems of her thoughts frayed to the tips, that the skeletons of rhythms had stammered to a slow, uneven drip. That she had been unable to write since Tanzania.*

*Amelia responded to the silence she herself had so deliberately created:*

*“Because, Ezdehar” (she pronounced the name pointedly, particularly, though she had no reason to know it)—*

*—Ezdehar devised an escape—the alleyway, the motorcycles, the relentless barking of a dog... It was not this stranger’s apology that she needed; it was not by her that Ezdehar wished to be understood.*

*For what stifles the imagination, more than grief, more than monotony, more than mental destitution, is the inimitable fear of being understood; the awareness of precisely what one wishes to say and the overwhelming urge to grab another person’s shoulders and shout it. But it was too much; one did not wish to be shouted at. Ezdehar wished to die.*

*“Because—” Amelia continued calmly, “Because I am a fan, you see.” Slipping her hand into a jet-black satchel she carried at her side, she revealed a stack of pages, worn and rusted, bound by a large clip.*

*Amelia handed the papers to Ezdehar, who held them again for the first time in four years, for the first time since she had burst into Paul Dewhurst’s bedroom in an apartment in Switzerland, waving them above her head in a flurry of triumph.*

*“Those are—Where did you—”*

*“Never mind where I got them. That is a story that is terribly dull. Let me tell you a story that isn’t.”*

*Ezdehar was still; but her eyes open, her lashes no longer crispering in the sun.*

*“I shopped it to every reputable playhouse in every purported community of art in the Western hemisphere; and then, several in translation, in the East,” Amelia explained. “I knew then what I know now, but one must perform these motions for the sake of the argument: no one would have it. You were right to abandon the pursuit of its performance. You were, however, remiss in conflating that with its quality. Not everything requires permission*

*in order to exist. If you believe that professional rejection means something then you also believe that anything worth being done has already been done before.” Both women tugged at the stack of pages that Amelia held out like a platter, but both relented to a mutual standstill, until they shared the weight of it like a mini platform for an imagined play. “But you don’t believe that.” Amelia tugged harder. “This. This is brilliant.” Ezdehar did not release the stack of the recovered pages from her left hand; she continued to hold to her sorry flyers in her right. “I understand what it is to imagine another world,” Amelia whispered, urgently pressing the connection. “A world too ambitious to be probable.” And here her eyes glowed with excitement—the first hint of something in her that seemed completely unscripted.*

*Ezdehar imagined running away from Amelia, and imagined how the flyers would flutter to the ground behind her and mix with the cobblestones, confounding this lady in black who had come bearing these pages from Ezdehar’s past. For the tragedy of it had not been not what they thought of the play, but what it made them think of her. . .*

*She had run so far and yet it kept happening, and would keep happening, and all she could think was that it could not be escaped because it was reined within her; there was no peace, no clarity. There was only the look of fear and coldness in Paul’s eyes and a harsh voice onstage blaring in sloppy Swahili words that were meant to be beautiful.*

*“Who are you?” Ezdehar asked the woman now.*

*“I find it fascinating that you don’t know.” The quality of Amelia’s voice changed then, became lighter, and louder, to cover the din that the sun seemed to evince as it reflected off the streets. “Your Italian is nearly perfect; you’ve been here only a few months. I’ve studied the language for twelve years and my vowels still fall off at their ends,” the corners of Amelia’s mouth curved into a smile, involuntarily. “Your obsession with obscurely poetic phrases keeps you at such odds with the world, and it seems, I imagine, that all interaction comes to you through an almost inalienable distance. But still you have a linguistic skill—a practical gift—that might bring to ease your conversations with people of almost any culture. The former is something I admire and must contend with in spite of its exigent perils; but the latter. . . is of great use to me. Your language is. . . impressive.”*

*“Impressive?” Ezdehar felt the undertone of this compliment; that what came naturally to her made her a curiosity, a specimen, an alien worthy of intrigue.*

*Amelia continued, before Ezdehar could fashion a response, “The ability is natural to you, of course. I believe that to be true. That’s why I’m here.”*

*This Amelia, this woman, was no flock of doves; no plastic-blue sky.*

*She took the entire stack of flyers from Ezdehar's hands—and what is more distinctive, Ezdehar let her. Then, Amelia continued, “Your French accent is flawless; all of your accents are flawless. Nobody here knows who you are. You came here to escape. And yet what was the point? You don't belong here. I've flown to Paris, Prague, Reykjavik, I've spent countless of thousands of dollars and interrogated the most perplexing people to find someone like you.” She paused now, waiting for a reaction that did not materialize into anything specific. “Look,” Amelia's whisper was now harsh, firm, comforting in its authority. “How hard I worked to find you, the amount of time I've spent, speaks to your personality and your skill—not to some happenstance absurdity about your character crafted by a mercenary group of theatrical malcontents. Your last production didn't work out. Fine. What they have, what they made, is not your masterpiece; what I'm holding in my hand and what you wouldn't let go of until just a moment ago, that is what your life is for.” Amelia paused, gauging Ezdehar's reaction. “Something went wrong. It lives and dies where it happened. Leave it there. The truly unbelievable thing about your life is something that hasn't even happened yet; what you will do for me; for my enterprise.” Amelia paused and stepped aside to let a fruit-cart pass. After the rumbling of the cobblestones had receded into the distance, she continued, “What's also unbelievable is that, instead, you're standing here awash in obscurity, trying to hand me a ridiculous flyer for what I can only imagine is a more ridiculous display of human insecurity...*

*“Join us. We'll be in the desert; no one will judge you. No one will fear you.” Amelia released her hold of Ezdehar's play, and Ezdehar stumbled slightly at the release of pressure. Amelia continued, “And I will give you people to love.” That might not have been exactly what Amelia had said; but then, the noise in Ezdehar's head had again grown louder, and a whirring and the intense desire to cry obfuscated her memory of it entirely.*

*What would be imprinted forever in her memory was the feeling she had immediately afterwards: she knew at that moment that something huge was to happen, that something great could change. But whether it was for better or worse, she could not say. All she knew was that the woman sitting in front of her with green-blue eyes would one day enact great change, and that to fight against it would be insurmountable. She imagined herself walking away at this precise moment, her heels clicking on the cobblestones beneath, and hearing the ripple of the project years later, somewhere in disembodied newspapers or currents of gossip.*

*“Are you going to keep going from city to city forever? Alone? Aren't you tired?” Amelia asked. She, herself, sounded tired.*

*Ezdehar's life was spotted with images—dramatic images—which*

*she knew would be carved into her memory forever. She could see them as they came, and everything would slow at their impending approach, and the scene would become brighter—the colors incredibly vibrant and distinctive, combining with the emotional tenor evinced by the person or persons who had precipitated the moment. She held in her mind such a moment for everyone—with Clarence, it was when he stooped down to pick up a piece of plastic he had dropped in the sand, that he had bent down though nobody would have known, or with young Zixin, it was when he had stared vacantly past her and she was struck by the solid-colored white of his shirt and she suddenly felt that he would always be miserable, and with Natalia, it was when she had looked so hurt, having asked only to hold a baby. With Amelia, it was here: this moment; Amelia’s face as she looked at her and the creases in her face looked tired and there was something inside her that was “alone” though she might never admit it.*

*Ezdehar imagined for a moment that she would let the opportunity pass; that ten minutes later, she would stand on this very same street handing flyers to Florentine passerby, but everything in the scene having become slightly muted and slightly less exciting than the alternative; that five years later she would hardly remember this moment, this moment that seemed so intense now and might have led to so many other moments, and that this whole string of possibilities would have been snuffed out by a careless refusal. As Ezdehar archived the moment in her memory, so that she could indulge in its pointed corners in the privacy of her own bed and in the empty space of night, Amelia made her concluding argument.*

*“We’re not locking you in,” Amelia had said. “Yes, you may never tell anyone of our existence; you may never even hint at what we do. Nobody else may go in or out—but you? If you come with me now, you can leave whenever you want.”*



If that was real life, that clicking of one’s heels on the cobblestone streets of Europe, then this ATLAS was no meet substitute. Ezdehar looked out into the small crowd of lingualists, all helpless to anticipate Amelia’s meaning.

If Ezdehar ever wrote this scene, she would have to remember to write about the way that Zixin stared off into the distance, conspicuously avoiding Amelia’s figure—what did he think about?—the way that Clarence turned his head slightly to

the side, as though even he did not know what Amelia would say next, and the way that Meryem, the village doctor with a streak of white running boldly down her hair, purposefully leaned forward in her seat, a part of her one step ahead of Amelia though most parts of her were not yet aware of what she was about to say. The fox was now rolling along the floor for Nemesia's amusement, and even Amelia paused for a moment to give Nemesia a stale admonition. Nemesia sheepishly collected her fox. Though she did not go to her seat, she pulled him closer to her and made him quiet.



## Clarence hears an announcement

Amelia led up to her announcement, as usual, with generalizations that could be modified by each individual mind to conform to whatever happened to strike it in that particular moment; she reiterated to the lingualists that problems of translation were of no small import (that, for example, “once” meant “one time” in English and “11” in Spanish, oft-referenced in ATLAS as the once-onsay problem); she crescendoed to a litany of wars that had begun and ended with an act of mistranslation (there was the historical blunder of a target on “Casablanca”—a word referring either to the African city or, literally, the “White House”—and a military confusion that descended an attack upon the American seat of government instead of the quiet town in Morocco). At this characteristic turn, the lingualists, shifting on the uncomfortable benches before the start of a full workday, took on a somber note; Amelia assured them that as they sat in a glass tower and put pen to paper, they were invisible heroes charged with saving the world. They tingled with importance; it was a noble honor to have been chosen, and then a mark of courage to have made the choice to stay. One must say it every so often, repetitive as it is, for one forgets; and it was thus that they did not stare longingly at the concrete boundary walls of ATLAS as a barrier to the lives they might have had, but as edificial evidence of the glory of Amelia’s patronage.

“Many of you have been here for nearly a decade; I owe no small debt to you for your service.” Amelia meant, of course, that they owed no small debt to her for hers. “As you know, many adjustments will soon be upon us—I’ll remind you now that one exemplary lingualist, for the first time in the history of ATLAS, will be promoted to Clarence’s assistant; she or he will have full

access to the Control Room—on the other side of the proverbial chain-link, as it were!—and will participate in the culling and the choosing of the documents to be translated.”

Following this hopeful declaration, Amelia drifted off into abstractions, sprinkled her comments with technical speech that the lingualists would have no way of knowing—and, like this, she ensured her own authority, made them feel her dominance. They would choose this life, she ensured—though they had only once been given the choice.

So Clarence could drift into his mind with impunity, alighting every so often to mark the progress of her speech; it was this sort of thing that he had admired in Amelia from the first moment he witnessed her public display, and he had never forgotten it ever since—not for a moment. Now, he could think of only one thing: Something must have happened, something terribly awful—though he could not guess what—and *she had not told him first*. He was sat with all the others, lingualists and Ezdehar alike in ignorance, looking up at Amelia—even after all these years—when he should have earned the right to look across. There was the shame—*did the others know he did not know? Did Ezdehar?*—and then there was a niggling certainty that he was not ready to face: *She does not need me*. And with a woman like Amelia, to be *needed* by her was one thing and to be *wanted* was quite another. Only one garnered definitive security. And, try as he would, Clarence could never convince himself of the converse.

Clarence now watched Amelia’s hands as she spoke, as she explained, as she began to carve her reality into shapes rendered unrecognizable. It was imposing, frightening, intimidating; and yet Amelia believed every word she spoke, and that was the art of it—that her words carved no illusory world; they resulted merely in the reconstituting of this one.

How different it must seem to Clarence, who once traveled the world in search of truth, to be confined to a place where truth was stripped clean and dropped at his feet. It was Clarence’s eminent privilege to have been educated in the healthy practice of skepticism whilst being inculcated with the importance of Proper Nouns.

If we are to understand Clarence fully—to interpret his reactions and interactions in a proper manner—we must understand this: that Clarence abandoned, in exchange for ATLAS’s



idealistic oblivion, a life of certain success—not devastation, like the orphans; not heartache, like Ezdehar. Clarence’s talent as a worldwide correspondent, escalated at an early age, had been just on the cusp of recognition. Therefore, we must understand that for him, everything here is weighed against everything there. Amelia had managed to pique his interest at the pivotal moment. She convinced this man, amongst the rain dripping from the nighttime leaves in Manhattan’s Central Park, to make her dreams possible. She had been married once; but that had not been her most important union.

Now, beneath the expressions that consciously animated Amelia’s face were traces of adverse emotions tugging at her from within; her carefully maintained countenance did not reveal these traces except in those moments of transition—the moment when she had just begun to speak, or the moment when she had just finished; the moment just before she manufactured an expression, or the moment after it had unconsciously begun to fade away. Clarence had noted this manifestation for the first time when they had met in what felt like a previous life; at one inaugural ceremony at the International Bureau of Independent States, where Amelia’s entrance into the public scene had been almost flawless.



NEW YORK CITY, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
(6 years before the establishment of ATLAS)

*The General Assembly Hall of the International Bureau of Independent States was smaller than Clarence had expected it to be; smaller, and yet somehow, more grand. He observed the characteristic movements of diplomats just arriving, jostling one another about as they took their seats, leaning back in their government-sanctioned black chairs with the comfortable air of having sat just so only moments ago in their comfortable homes.*

*What was suddenly apparent in person had been utterly imperceptible on television: that the podium—on videotape a domineering presence—seemed to be the smallest object and yet the most significant, rows of audience towering around it both in numerosity and in elevation. The slight convexity of the wood-panelled walls gave the impression of a hollowed-out walnut, of something cupped securely from the outside.*

*To be here as a journalist was to be an important pair of eyes; a pair of*

*eyes to be multiplied into other eyes adrift, abroad, in the streets, in the home. The pressure of this army of eyes (somewhere no doubt behind the sinus cavity) made one's vision sharper, one's surroundings more pronounced. Already a narrative should begin to form, and what fits should stand out in brazen relief while all else fades; a journalist begins, of course, before the speech does. And yet Clarence, unaware of this unspoken dictate, took account of all of his surroundings equally, flitting his amateurish attention from this action to that image to this metaphor—to whatever, in short, piqued his voracious, undisciplined interest.*

*On the surface, Clarence strove to evince a conformist comfortability; to give the impression—to himself, more than to any other—that he had been in this room a million times; that his glazed vision had taken in numerous times the recess lights that spotted the ceiling like fireflies, that he had grown inured to the criss-crossing beams of the lamps that highlighted the stage at the lowest level of the amphitheater.*

*The hordes of milling journalists (and all of their associated equipment) rendered it no easy task to read the place cards affixed to each seat in the stage-side section of the audience reserved for the media. Clarence searched for his own name some time in vain when, at last, a rather tall man reached up to adjust his glasses and the shifting of his lanky elbow revealed the placard that Clarence sought: “Ruby Alden, *The Circadian*.” So they had not had time to replace the name with his own, Clarence reasoned, assuring himself that the oversight would prove to be of little consequence.*

*He paused for several seconds before boldly forging a path through a group of collegial media members who, immersed deep in discussion, formed a barrier between his own person and the chair which—resulting from a fortuitous circumstance—would belong to him for the next four hours. Once he began to make his way, he recognized that he had made a slew of disgruntled momentary-foes along his path. When he at last sat down, he found his briefcase was too big; each time a new journalist was admitted into his row, he was forced to pull the briefcase awkwardly into his lap and towards his chest to allow the intruder passage. Constantly being made to shrink up his body in this way might have occasioned in Clarence some embarrassment, if not for the disquieting fact that nobody seemed to take any notice of him at all.*

*Once settled, he finally had the leisure to notice that most of the others had already taken to scribbling notes on their pads; they had not to deal with the constant interruptions of lifting briefcases and shifting to the side. The woman next to him, whose sandalwood perfume began to overpower his senses, merely crossed her legs more tightly as newcomers attempted to pass. She continued to look serene and important even as these members of the press*

*underwent great contortionary feats to brush past without touching her knees.*

*Clarence panicked. He had already fallen behind. He rationalized his inadequacies to an imaginary naysayer, citing the deplorably short time he had been given to research the event, to look up histories, to consult past articles, to survey the space. But these arguments, delivered to himself with silent fervor, came to no avail. Clarence was no fool—he knew enough to know that a journalist does not become prepared; a journalist is prepared. One only has time to prepare for something predictable, after all, and something predictable is hardly ever worth being prepared for.*

*If he shackled himself to “predictable,” he might well slink away with his briefcase now and subject his row companions to an ill-timed exit.*

*The inaugural ceremony had not yet begun, but the entire room had grown silent, and all watched the final preparations that took place on stage. Two giant, raised television screens on either side of the podium flickered on, and a band of technicians scattered purposefully in all directions along the green carpeted area of the stage, checking this and that and performing tasks that seemed to Clarence to be all-important (but, incidentally, seemed to have no immediate material effect whatsoever). But were these actions important enough to note? Who knew? He scribbled something, that the green carpeted stairs that led to the podium reminded him of the rolling hills of the Andes... An amazing first sentence—imagistic, dignified, clear—Clarence told himself—if it came to that. He would not squander the opportunity that had been afforded to him today; if all went well, he would not always be made to sit in chairs that were reserved for “Ruby Alden.”*

*At last, the team of technicians disappeared and a meek-looking man in an expensive suit made an announcement in an official monotone that set the tone for the entire evening: “A welcome to all in attendance. I will commence this meeting by introducing to you, for her initial presiding over the International Bureau as Secretary-General, Ms. Amelia Carlyle.” A sputtering of applause rose in the hall, collected in the walnut walls and emanated out again. Clarence watched as the meek-looking man walked off the stage and gestured to a door that seemed to open, as though out of nowhere, from somewhere on the ground below the raised stage, behind the podium. Clarence watched this, and absorbed the sound of the echoing applause. It was moments later that Clarence realized all the journalists around him were scrawling impressions of this lackluster introduction into their notepads, and that he himself had recorded nothing; but it was okay, he told himself; he had that bit about the Andes and the green carpeted stairs.*

*Moments later, reality returned to him with a sudden immediacy; this was the first time he was to see her.*

*Before the firefly lights in the ceiling fell on her, while she was still protected by the shadow of the podium, after she had closed the door behind her and begun to climb the soft green steps, Clarence saw Amelia. She appeared to stand solidly at the center of his hazy misgivings that had, only moments ago, been all-encompassing.*

*Amelia was different than Clarence had expected her to be—more human, somehow. She had a particularly narrow face, one that would have struck any person as astoundingly beautiful if this quality was not so overshadowed by an aspect of controlled domineerance. The lines on her face were all vertical; her hair was abysmally black and unapologetically straight; her green eyes gave the impression of the sort of intensity that is not fractious and that has never smelt of unfocus. The intensity of her gaze was all the more intimidating because there was no recklessness in it; no unpredictability to speak of; she would achieve exactly what she set out to achieve. The even-toned pallor of her skin admitted no shadows and no mortal ruddiness.*

*The other journalists must have been writing this, versions of this in all kinds, as Clarence was overcome by the importance of this moment to him, to his career, to his definition of excellence; he already began to imagine telling the story of the first day he had watched the ascendance of the Secretary General of the International Bureau... and then it struck him that it must have been, for Amelia moreso exponentially, a day that she would remember all her life. That she must have opened the door, stepped around the podium and onto that first step knowing that this would be recorded (by the scribbling journalists in Clarence's midst) as the inevitable beginning to whatever inevitable ending the media would craft for her in her five years in office; that they would rewrite this moment, year after year, each time finding within it the beginnings of every action that she would take while in office. They would find that in this, here, in a woman stepping on a stair...*

*Clarence watches her steadily, forgets his pen; the other journalists continue to jot notes about the introductory speech delivered earlier. They do not watch this new Secretary walk up to the podium; for this moment, as she climbs the third step mid-way between the ground and the stage, Clarence's are the only eyes that are on her.*

*But then: she falters. None of the other journalists see; they have yet to look up from their papers; they plan to look at her only after she has already taken the stage. But Clarence sees this small misstep, that the wedge of her high heel falls to the left ever so slightly and a flash of fear overcomes her face, and she looks down at her feet, and then up again at the audience with a smile—because she has faltered and because, even then, all was not lost. Clarence is captivated; Amelia looks out into the audience to check if anyone*

*has seen. To her relief, she notices only one young journalist riveted to her movements, from a seat that only barely belongs to him.*

*Finally, the mass of journalists looks up, like a stock of sheep. Now they take their pictures of the new Secretary General of the International Bureau of Independent States, smiling picturesquely beneath the firefly beams; Amelia stands on the stage in her most refined posture, covered in lightbulb flashes. Clarence wishes that he had taken his photograph moments before, when the wedge of her heel had moved slightly to the left and her shoulders had come off-balance; but then, how could he have known that she would falter?*



Amelia continued on to her grand announcement, “It is my misfortune to be the humble conduit of the information I must now relay to you. You will all notice a change in the composition of the body of lingualists; some of you may have noticed it already. It has happened...” she paused, and for some reason, looked at Ezdehar—who might have given her sympathy, but, as she had no idea what Amelia was about to say, was at an utter loss of how to give it—“by some strike of poetic justice that the last recruit to have come to us has been the first recruit to leave. I mean to foster no hysteria; I mean only to tell you what you need to know: Lau-lava has been permanently expelled from the enterprise. As you all know, her infractions were many and frequent...”

For several minutes, there was no sound. This came, as one might imagine, as a bit of a shock to Amelia. (Amelia had been, after all, before she had been the leader of these few, the leader of many—she had served as Secretary General of the International Bureau of Independent States and had commanded rooms of hundreds.) Having become inured to the muffled din of the adult baritone, mumbling and muttering in perpetual consternation at every policy, statute, and motion brought to pass, even ten years in a village of her own making had not prepared her for this moment, for the calm silence of sixty-some soft hearts, learning, absorbing, learning, accepting, learning, re-acclimating, learning, becoming...

All of the lingualists, as if by instinct, now stared at Nemesia; Nemesia, finding herself the focus of this sudden attention, looked alarmed and ran behind the podium to hug Amelia’s waist; her

footsteps echoed in the amphitheater, and even the horses outside seemed to have stopped their rustling. Fennecus the Fox lifted one ear straight up and quizzically surveyed the audience; perhaps he meant to announce it to the group—for Laulava had been Nemesis's best, and only, playmate.

Then Zixin stood up in his seat—he looked suddenly angry, with a seething, quiet violence that Clarence had never before seen in him. Zixin stood up with a decisive stomping of his right foot—not heeding Astor's exhortations to sit—and this violation was echoed by the stone walls, which resounded with this action. The Zixin Clarence looked at now was so different than the skinny boy wasting away in a mental hospital in China. Clarence remembered taking the recruitment photo of a figure on an olive-green sofa, with a vacant look in his eyes and a window that displayed the city of Shenjen behind him. But even then, in the face of the lens, Zixin had attempted a smile; now he looked aghast and indignant. A sudden energy burst forth through his large oval eyes, and he shook off Astor's restraining hand without once dis-attaching his gaze from Amelia's.

Ezdehar, watching this, now remembered something: that she had seen an elephant in Tanzania and had been shocked at how starkly its leather captured the red-clay color of adobe brick from Mexico. There should have been nothing in that—merely a color, draped over a somber creature trudging lazily along—but there was something majestic in the lackadaisical swinging of a vast and heavy trunk, as though the air was simply something to be swept aside. Ezdehar could not have been sure how that one thought had led to the other, and why now, staring at Zixin, it made her feel guilty and small.

Amelia said nothing; no Reprimand came; she did not dismiss her audience. They sat like this for some time, Zixin standing, silently, no one daring to speak, until Amelia finally proclaimed, "Talk of Laulava ceases from this moment. Everyone, back to your work. Jabari, please ring the bell."

Every so often, a distinct feeling would come over Clarence that at any time Amelia might open a door and the International Bureau of Independent States would be waiting for her behind it; that she might enter upon a stage and deliver a speech that had taken a lifetime to prepare; that ATLAS was no more than a staging area for the real life that she had always been destined to have.



It should have happened then; someone should have stood up for Laulava. Ezdehar thought of Tanzania, where no one had stood up for her.

Natalia sat in her seat of shame next to an empty chair—which had been set out, she thought now, as a cruel joke and a visceral reminder, for Amelia had known full well that Laulava could not come. Looking out at the faces of fifty-nine linguists, Natalia thought of Laulava, dangling about in the world, she remembered with such vividness having brushed grains of sand from the metal chair only minutes ago, and the familiarity, the banality of this action betokened in her a new horror, that quotidian motion pitted against the new materialization of a vast unknown.

And then Astor—he felt a betrayal, and a violence that he had not felt for some time. Beyond the stark, handsome lines of his face and the lips that gave rise to perfectly enunciated expressions of social grace and humor were now pursed in stress, in a damnably straight line, as though there had been jilted someone of his kin.

## PART TWO

—

*Amelia Devises a Village*



[1]

Amelia devises a village

LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM  
(4 years before the establishment of ATLAS)

Two years had passed since Amelia had faltered on the steps of the International Bureau of Independent States; a period of nearly seven hundred days had come and gone since she had fumbled a half-step on her way to the podium. Her service in the duration of this time had been no less than commendable. For these two years—something to which even her most unsympathetic transcribers will attest—she served under the auspices of the International Bureau both justly and honorably. She harbored her private misgivings, of course, but she expressed them just to the extent that a public leader should, demonstrating qualities of discernment that no more than flirted with the edge of disagreement. She presented to the public a solid but not dogmatic front. She drew upon a set of composed expressions, even in the most unexpected of circumstances, and she brooked calamities with the grace of a woman who must have been raised calmly in the eye of a raging storm; with the grace of a woman who must have been raised for exactly this.

Indeed, in her time as Secretary General, Amelia enjoyed a sudden and unlimited access to the internal affairs of countries whose rights to privacy had previously excluded her. But the effect of such an influx of heterogeneous information is not to be underestimated—Amelia’s mind, like any other, had been grown for a particular place at a particular time, and could hardly be flapped about from ideology to ideology any more than a single seed can be expected to sprout red flowers in one place and blue cacti in another. Yes, even Amelia—as she shook the hands of

presidents in the Far East and prostrated herself to the leaders in the South—felt an affinity to her home in Britain. Even she felt the bilious taste of deception rising in her throat as she donned kimonos in the name of cultural diversity and quelled protests under the guise of homogeneity. Still, she presented to the media, always, a measured smile.

Her qualms were instead turned inward—into her private life and into her bedroom, where she had recently invited a Senegalese musician named Moussa to enter with her into a swiftly consummated sacred contract of marriage (the story of their meeting ranks among the more unusual of meetings; but that tale is the center of a different narrative). It need not be emphasized that this relationship marked the beginning of the unraveling of her career—of *that* career, that is—and the gradual inception of an entirely new one. It will only be admitted, here, that the choice had been hasty; that its effects, though gradual, would be permanent.

The change had begun with one seemingly innocent, domestic conversation, whose reach would far exceed the intention of either party. The morning had been a habitual one; the afternoon a mere repetition of the last. But, thirty years later, Amelia would tell her biographer that that evening was the most important of her life (excepting the night of the birth of her daughter) and that it was that precise evening she would revisit and change, if revisited and changed it could be. She would wish that she could have been just as upset but far less creative; she would have changed it so that she would have ranted and raved in the way that accomplishes nothing but keeps things from being accomplished.

As she would tell it, the evening began with a desk full of tangled calamities: It seems that, on the day in question, an international broadcast of a work of underground pop music originating in Mali had turned the heads of youth that had gained some control over the political infrastructure of Bhutan. These self-proclaimed rebels had gleaned, from the song, a call to arms, which had somehow instigated a wave of Icelandic disgust against their Norwegian neighbors. Claims had emerged, in a short period of hours, that the recent earthquake in Iceland had been rigged by the government of Norway; an allegation that was clearly false, especially in light of the fact that Norway had spent the afternoon tracking down a class of rogue priests who had escaped from Fin-

land after a rapid conclusion of their schooling and who, allegedly, had taken to the countryside to preach their soapbox theories from atop actual soap boxes (they were uncharacteristically short, these priests, and in need of this vertical assistance). Finland's government, in response to this news, chose to declare neither acceptance nor condemnation of the misplaced messengers of God; they were too busy, after all, analyzing the ripple effects of a sudden drop in employment that had been reported in the northern tropical regions of Suriname. This unemployment was thought, by some, to have originated in some miscommunications involving maternity leave debates and universal suffrage in Brazil—but, that, well, the likelihood of *that* was suspect.

Amelia had been explaining the events to her husband, over the phone, as she did each day; in the short time of their marriage, she had only made it home before 7 P.M. twice, and one of those times had been in response to a latent sickness that had never materialized (had it been his illness or hers? she could not remember). “The people in one country go to sleep, and the people of another wake up and lap up the remains of their crises like a pack of carnivorous wolves. One after the other, it moves around the world like a wayward stack of dominoes.” Amelia moved the phone to her other ear, turned off the light to her office, and wrapped her scarf halfway around her neck. “I feel like I’m living in twenty-four time zones,” she continued. “Like it’s always daytime where I am and no one ever rests.”

She had said it partly as a joke and partly as an invitation to sympathy, but Moussa had responded drily, with a tired asperity mitigated by his accent, “It is funny—you live in twenty-four time zones and yet we are never in the same one.”

Amelia bristled; she let the large leather chair accept her weight again—it was still warm with her presence—and she turned on a desk lamp.

Moussa must have felt the unwrapping of the scarf, though he likely heard only the clicking of the lamp. He conjured the warmth that had begun their marriage and said, “Would you like to hear something I’ve been working on today?”

His fingers hit the guitar with a rhythm too carefully measured; it was technically flawless, but even in the digitized replication of the rendition, Amelia felt keenly that the natural flow of his voice felt interrupted by the inexperience of his hands on an

instrument that was ill-suited to his African cadence.

“It’s beautiful,” she told him.

“It’s not written for the guitar... But I received a phone call today. They will—how do you say—they will to deliver the kora and the tabale tomorrow morning. Then I will be able to play for you the way it is to be properly played. You will love it.” When he spoke, Amelia always felt that he wished he could be singing; as with a writer who reads, Amelia thought, and wishes only to write. He said, “You know there is a story of this song. It cannot be translated to guitar. It must be played on the bala. The Mali ruler named Mansa Sunjata—he sent his jeli, name of Diakouma Doua, to his enemy. His enemy was magician, he of the name Soumaoro of the Susa people. Doua did find there the instrument the ‘soso bala.’ They say magician Soumaoro—this, Sunjata’s sworn enemy—had in the source of his power in the soso bala instrument. Diakouma played it beautiful. Like he had played it all his life. And Soumaoro accepted him as one of his own. He kept him there, this, the advisor of his greatest nemesis. Kept his enemy in his own midst to play the soso bala for him in his way.” Then he added, “You know, that is why all of your problems of today.”

“How is that?” Amelia asked.

“The Mande people of Mali play the old music now, but they have not the soso bala. They play it on the guitar or on—th—the—electric. It puts an urgency, a quickness, and takes away the story quality. It sounds harsh, oppositional, of confrontation. It was not so; the jeliw who plays for the townspeople in the past had their patrons. They told genealogies in their music; they told family events and proverbs in their songs. They were our historians. They sang of an ancestry which was of no business of anyone else’s. Now they put it on the radio... of course it makes the others angry. Makes them think of war. But the Malinese were not thinking of war, I will guess, and not thinking of their own dominance. They were just telling their story to their people so they know themselves and where they come from. And now it has circled the world today as a cry of battle!” He laughed.

“If I had called you at 4 A.M. maybe I could have put you on the radio to tell them that,” Amelia said. “All kinds of earthquakes might have been thwarted.” It had been said in jest; in appreciation of the atmosphere that Moussa had mustered, the

happiness they had had that she had been reminded of when she had watched him play in Mali for the first time and had asked him to play in Britain for her; Amelia had not expected this moment here, listening to Moussa on the phone rekindle that other moment of their meeting, to be the seed of the enterprise that would be the end of her marriage.

Moussa replied, “Oh it is no use! They will not listen if I tell them on the radio. ‘He is a man from Mali,’ they will say, ‘of course he say this.’ But if one of their own men write it, in their own language, then they listen. ‘Yes,’ they say then, ‘of course this is true. And if you do not agree you are uneducated and do not know and do not read.’ If I speak they will hear my accent. But I can write as anybody if I write in their language. If I write perfect. Or if they edit me, keep my meaning the same but express it perfect. They will not know me. I am sad to say it is not like before; when Soumaoro would listen to the advisor of his enemy play on his very own *soso balo*; to strum the beauty that would swell his power. Today they will kill Diakouma when he is not in his own land; they will not think he has come to sing.” He alighted from his reverie. “You only tell me about the world,” he said. She felt that he placed his guitar on the couch, that he brushed back his dreadlocks and cocked one eyebrow upward in a knowing state of eccentric curiosity that was oddly comforting in its authority. “You did not tell me about your day,” he said.

“Me? There’s no ‘me’ in my day. I don’t do a damn thing. You wrote a song. I moved information around.”

“Then do something,” he said simply. “Do at least one thing, and then come home.” But he added, “Do come home, but, please.”

Amelia did do something, that evening, and she would forever console herself with the falsity that it had been at her husband’s behest—that that had been what he meant. When Amelia hung up the phone that evening, she had removed her scarf entirely, and proceeded to write her proposal to herself (upon whom would it fall, after all, to enact it?). She conceived of the Associated Translation Liaisons of the Altruistic States, or ATLAS, that evening, in the dark of her office with a scarf laying at her side and the husband who had suggested it waiting for her at home.

Even when she went home that night, and her husband sang to

her the song that he had practiced in her absence, Amelia's mind began running on what she would do, what they would do; she would start a secret village; nobody would know where; and how would she fund it? that bore some thinking about; would she tell her husband? for safeguarding, he would have to be kept in the dark; how would these translators remain unbiased, not use the translation agency to their own ends? she would keep them all in a village, they would have no culture of their own would not feel British like she did, but they would feel that they were a part of nothing and of everything; they would be merely human, would know all languages, slip in and out of one or another but feel that they were deceiving nobody; and how would they have no culture of their own? They must not know their own genealogies, must not remember them, must not be reminded of anything that might bias them to own culture over the next. They must be forbidden from accumulating any recorded culture that could be passed down—they must create nothing that will define them as themselves.

Then, as Moussa's notes reminded her sweetly of nights in Mali and stirred in her desires for the life of another, she understood what she must do for the survival of her system, if she was indeed to create one. The most painful corollary that Amelia wrote—and it pained her because it had not quite been what Moussa had meant and yet it was something she had learned from him—was the injunction against the playing and the composing of music by the Association of Translation Liaisons of the Altruistic States. Perhaps she believed really that harmonies could be so pernicious to objectivity and self-control—perhaps it was the danger of material culture alluded to before—or perhaps it was something so simple as peace of mind, that she was plagued by the memory of the melodic plucking of the kora, and that she just could not bear to hear this, ringing lonely in her ears, for the rest of her life.

## PART THREE

—

*J.B. Jutterten and the Three Regions*

[1]

### The Three Regions

Among the archipelagos of the South Pacific Ocean, far from the reaches of the Sahara Desert that houses ATLAS, there exists a region that has managed to avail itself of the privilege of invisibility; that has persevered in its reclusivity and exclusivity long after the tractorian scourge of individuality has wiped clean the faces of all other cultures of its kind. Let us be clear—the cartographer’s pen has not vaulted over this area unimpeded, nor has the vision of it eluded every human eye. It is not thanks to failure of detection that the peoples of this land have enjoyed their rather secluded existence; on the contrary, they are known, and have always been known. And yet, invisible they are, for they have the power to move without being themselves moved, and they possess hands unseen.

Now what is it, you might ask, that has sheltered this little pocket of dust and earth from the prying eyes of some six billion specimens of the human race? You would not believe it if I told you—and though true it is rather unbelievable—that a ring of treacherous water encircles the region, much as a strain of mildew girds the inside of a filthy tub, and this troublesome ring of water, which emits reportedly a unique dark violet hue, has been the cause of many a nautical mishap; sail straight towards it, they say, and you will be hurled unto a an interminably long tangential current, you will be swept off in a state of blissful disconsciousness, you will awaken in bewilderment to find yourself in the forests of Russia or the beaches of Taiwan. Or perhaps—alright, let us grant it to you—you manage to penetrate this invidious circle of dark violent persuasion, then you bear the guilty responsibility of cursing your own good fortune, for as soon as you wrest from the trials and tribulations that you have just undergone the knowledge that there is something worth living for and that there



is a way to live for it, as soon as, that is, you have understood the deepest and darkest secrets of the human condition, that human condition is taken from you; in short, you are drown-dead; your boat, capsized.

An inevitable tragedy; the fault of the reckless adventurer, you say. Fine, then consider an approach by air-for water rings, deep violet or otherwise, hold their dominion only in the water. The sky admits no impediment to the free-flying fowl. You continue to argue this, and yet I could have told you from the beginning that your cause is doomed: for the ring that girds the water has its counterpart in air, and the flesh of a bird is no more able to pass through this barrier than is the metallurgic body of the curious pilot; airborne fowl and vehicular apparatus alike are beset by a terrible slew of winds as they make contact with the noxious dome of air that cups the region from above. No pilot who knows his skies would dare tempt the temperament of the sphere, for the willful disintegration of the human body, it is widely observed, is a frightful thing.

Such are the defenses, offered by the natural world, in support of the sovereignty of this region. The people of this land are much the happier for their want of knowing the portions of the civilized world with which we may consider ourselves unfortunately familiar.

The region in question is divided into a triad of topographical areas, wherein each terrain is home to an entirely separate and entirely isolated race of people. Due to the unusual wind currents that converge at one point in this region (marked on the map with an X), the climate of each topographical area is solely its own; such a spatially confined and simultaneously striated range of temperation has not, thus far, been observed in any other corner of the earth.

The Adelan people inhabit the island that lies just off the coast of the mainland. One side of the island affords a beautiful view of the mountains of the Ghotchni mainland that lie across the water. Children can be seen playing on the sands of these Adelan island coasts, fashioning mini replicas of the mountainous fiends that they believe to exist on the other side of the sea. The peak-strewn land of the Ghotchni is close enough to cast a foreboding glance onto the island, but far enough so that it casts

no literal shadow; at no point of day do the Adalam find their sunlight to be obscured by this mountainous monstrosity. This being the case, they find neither the motivation nor the strength to sail across the pellucid waters that separate that coast from this one; their curiosity and their wonder for the foreign land is quite perfectly counterbalanced by their fear and their contentment. Much of their contentment as a community arises from their exceptional nutrition and robust physical health. As a people, they subsist largely on a diet of fish (which they deem to be spiritually meaningful) and yams (which grow quite abundantly there). The inhabitants of this island find very little reason to leave it. After all, they have been blessed with the most beneficial of the three climates of region in the ring; Adalam land is not only unusually fertile, but also unusually versatile. Though the weather year-round is unbearably hot, it is of no consequence to the inhabitants of the island, and they bear it all the same. This unique invariance of temperature lulls their bodies into a state of self-awareness wherein, without the vicissitudes of weather to contend with, they are free instead to focus on the individual wants and needs of their biological systems.

As for the Ghotchni mountain areas, they contain almost no land that is not situated on an incline, so that the people who inhabit this region live nearly the whole of their lives in a perpetually slanted standing position or a perpetually leaning sitting one. The Ghotchni people, unlike the Adalam, do not live in private huts or dwellings, separated into neat family units. Instead their family members are engaged in a perpetual itinerant rotation, such that the father of one family moves upward on the incline after several months only to become father to another, while one child from that residence—if he is of age—is sent to a hut lower on the incline in order to take up residence with a new family. Essentially, the situation amounts to this: a series of dwellings are engraved into the side of each mountain, and the residents of each rotate from home to home after the passage of every few months. Each series of dwellings consists of about five or six homes, such that each individual returns to live in his or her first dwelling about once every three years. Such a system promotes great unity among the people of each mountain face, and when this small “village” of residents vacates their homes after the passage of a generation or two, they move as one unit, as they carve their way

into another face of another mountain, where they will then begin again. By way of trade, the Ghotchni are a tool-making culture. They have spared no expense in the development of tools that they require to negotiate the harsh landscape of their mountain environments. As for livestock, they have plenty; and sheep figure very prominently into many of their endeavors. The Ghotchni are remarkably pale in skin color, and in the times of snow, sometimes seem to blend into the mountains. Many a dead body in this region has been mistaken for a mere snowdrift—and, in one embarrassing instance, vice versa.

The third tribe—the Rkivids—are by far the smallest of the three cultures that inhabit the region within the ring. The Rkivids live in a landlocked valley region that is surrounded on all four sides by the mountains of the Ghotchni. The original settlers were few in number, and were likely offshoots of either the Adalam or the Ghotchni people; though Rkivid babies have been known to come in many colors, their pigment diffuses into the atmosphere such that after the age of one, no Rkivid baby's color is distinguishable from any other's. This has been surmised, by some—for they are a culture of scholars—to be a result of the focused and specified diet that the Rkivids consume throughout the course of their lifetimes. Though their life expectancy, on average, is far lower than that of the Adalam, they have no basis for comparison, nor do they consider their lives lacking in any germinal purpose. The original Rkivid settlers were enamored of the land for its peculiar preponderance of nuts, the trees of which create a beautifully ornate lattice that overhangs the entire valley like an enormous sheet of lace. The nuts are shaped like a tessellation of stars, having 9 points in total; the scenery can objectively said to be the most breathtaking in the world. These 9-pointed spherical stars hang from the lattice of trees that bedizens the sky, and the sun sends its rays in discrete sleets through this gentle filter, giving the impression of little droplets of sunlight that literally dot the forested pathways of the Rkivid groundscape, much as flattened pieces of gum or wayward trash dots ours. The effect of the Rkivid sky on the viewer is unconscionably great; these valley dwellers live in a perpetual state of intellectual nirvana; the environment does not prick obtrusively at a single one of their senses, but instead seems to exist in a perpetual unity that lands softly on the mental palette; as it stands, the Rkivids' aesthetic

environment is so augmentative to their mental well-being that they are able to access even the most obscure of the untapped regions of the human brain. In fact, you will be shocked to find that it is the Rkivids you have to thank for the theory of relativity; for the discovery of the double helix; for the solution to Fermat's last theorem, and, for that matter, also for the origination of it! Using their intellectual capacities, they have managed to create a satellite, from which they project their findings into the information systems of the world and attach to them more general and acceptable names—for the Rkivid nomenclature is specific, and rather overridden with consonants, and would arouse suspicion—the result of this deception being that you think that it is your own countrypeople who have made the aforementioned discoveries.

The Rkivids live a rather confined life; they prefer it this way. The Rkivids fear the surrounding mountains, where the threat of open un-latticed skies seems to them altogether oppressive and inoperably dull. The small Rkivid ecosystem has also led to the development of several new species of mammal: one which is a strange combination of the cat and the loris and which has been domesticated but also lives quite comfortably in the wild. This animal has been named the “lopid.” Rkivids are not farmers; they are not tool-makers; they are tacticians. Naturally, the feeble-minded are disallowed from participating in the reproductive act; some standard is, therefore, maintained.

So, there you have it: the three cultures, independent and individuated to the utmost, all soon to be subsumed under a single banner. It is this process of subsumation that is in motion when a young boy named Ember runs home to his family, feet slapping upon the sand, bursts through the doorway imploring his beloved sister to turn on the radio as the family gathers round; it is this new era that stands on the precipice of the Ghotchni lifescape as a scatter of whispers passes down and down the mountainside before it passes up again; it is the heralding of this age that is upon the solitary and cerebral Ydvillik, who presses her back against a tree as she scribbles the theory of the universe on a notepad while her Rkivid compatriots navigate the forest in a thundered panic, all in a tizzy about the new man who has just staked his claim: J.B. Jutterten, Sir of something, ruler of a land which will come to be known as Hacylon.

## PART FOUR

—

*Crossing the Acheron*

## MISTRANSLATION #1

—

*Department for the Housing and Curating of Literary Documents*

—

Zixin translates “*J’ai rêvé dans la Grotte où nage la sirène...*”, which becomes “*I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.*” Thereby, he makes his mark upon the world.

## Zixin at Dinner

“Laulava, shall I, Zixin, tell you the story of what I see? We stare at your chair at the table; we try to imagine it has always been empty. Above us, the dome of the Dining Hall heaves a great sigh but is arrested in a state of inhalation. Outside, the building appears a mound of sand risen from the ground and looks the same color as a dirty biscuit; inside, its ornate ceiling recalls the perfect symmetry of a Petrarchan sonnet.

“For Jabari the skylight is an oculus through which we are watched, threatened, so that any one of us might be expelled; during the day, through its diameter of twenty-seven feet, the sunlight illuminates Isadora and her small Argentinian nose. Now, at night, a lantern hangs from the ceiling and the flame dances like a bonfire in the sky. The light falls in a beam upon a round table in the center, where Nemesia drops Amelia’s hand and Ezdehar eats only barely, and the reflected light ricochets off their clinking forks until it flickers all around our tables, which extend in circles all around them. The diameter of this rotunda equals that of its height—Avi looks up and contemplates perfection, and wills the distant-you the strength that is your due—this he communicates with the sharpness of his chin and the scholarly indentations of his cheeks. Astor, who has yet to arrive, will remember an image of the Pantheon, and that he has read of a murder committed after a theft. Natalia already contemplates her meat and wonders why they built the building round; she walks through worlds of humans and sees this world undone. Hendrik describes; merely describes, the wooden tables blending into the floor and ourselves, figures in white, gathered for dinnertime. He will tell of the clinking of the forks, of the story of today, “There were forks; they clinked.” To me, it is something else; a deep inhale; the sum

of all our stories pressurizing the air inside so that the ceiling does not cave...

“Laulava, we will not hear the sonorous curves of your soft humming wafting up through the hidden vents as we work; now only quiet, and a clean, cold air will cut the thick buzzing of thirty minds thinking in a large glass tower; now we will feed off of industriousness, diligence, and a vague pretension. Pretension because we have not been exiled—pretension because we are those whom Amelia deems still worthy to control. There are now two types of people in this world: you are the one, and we are the other. But they cannot guess what it is their right to know; Amelia has lied to them, and even Clarence watches in bafflement. But here, at dinner, we will all think it but we will not speak of it. Because we are adults now, we must speak only of things which we do not think.

“And so our eyes pass over each other in circles. He sees me and I see her and she sees him. We see and try only not to be seen; we try so hard not to be seen that we do not see.

“Young Nemesis tugs at my shirt-jacket (it is still warm for shirt-jackets, perhaps, but I had sensed a rising chill). She is taller than I remember, tonight, and waves of brown plunge raggedly down her hair. It is strange that I haven’t noticed them before; those, and the emerging outlines of her face that have begun to overshadow the childlike roundness to which we have all grown accustomed. I think of facing her, but reconsider: if I offer her my gaze, I will fall out of sync with the others; I will become a ghost somewhere else—there, at the other end of the table, where I belong.

“Zixin, where did they take Laulava?” Nemesis asks, but I act as if I have not heard her, as though I am immersed in their talk; she will not notice me as callous, but will think herself too soft. I cannot tell her what I know. It is important, important, that I do not slip away, that I do not think in poetry...

*“Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread against the sky...”*

“It is hard to say why I am here, dangling on this edge—sandwiched between Isadora on one side and empty space on the other, Hendrik’s formidable presence before me and Natalia



tucked far onto the other end of the interminable rectangle—but little by little, the drizzling inevitability of my situation saturates my thoughts. There is an expendability in my presence at this dinner; a lazy knocking in my mind that calls me somewhere else.

“I have only arrived five minutes late, but by this count, my presence has become an uncomfortable addition, an incontrovertible intrusion; because of these five minutes, I have been sat here. Clarence had shuffled a new chair into a narrow space between one table leg and the next, had scraped the ground with it, emanating ripples of graceless silence across the others’ dinner plates. When they looked up at me, their faces had been nuanced with a perturbed indifference.

“The worst of it is that I have been seated near Hendrik—a dismal fate, indeed. The past ten years have done little to dull this displeasure. Something inside me refuses Hendrik completely; balks at his very existence. But then, something else inside me finds him so utterly definable, and so decidedly fascinating. That will draw my attention. With Hendrik, everything becomes facts, perpendicular lines and intransigent corners—if the world is not careful, the entirety of our thoughts will be stockpiled away into his immovable matrix, to be drawn out one by one, at will!

“‘That doesn’t make any sense,’ Hendrik explains. His sentences are light on the top, heavy on the bottom—they land like spears, sharp-end first, flying in weighted arcs and shuddering the ground upon contact. ‘There are no camels native to this part of the desert. There never have been. And they cannot have gotten in—ATLAS is surrounded by walls, ten feet high of concrete.’ Hendrik’s thoughts are not connected, one to the other, are not tangled into stubborn webs that come up in clumps. ‘A camel is a fanciful creature, to be depicted in paintings and pulled through a needle—’ he continues.

“‘Oh!’—it is Natalia, interrupting him from across the way. ‘So it’s impossible, then?’ I know what she is thinking. I have heard her mumbling under her breath when she thinks nobody else is listening. Just now, a million examples course through her head—for that is how her blood works, I know this from her studying gaze, from the way she cuts her meat into confident pieces—a million examples in her head and she merely smiles in silence. The rest understand that she has won, but only I know why. I can read her. Her thoughts are connected one to the other, and

where Hendrik lifts one smoothly, she sees a hundred that stretch back for ages, clinging to his one like lichens, and though she does not voice her equivocations, I find that they are there—flapping, flapping, cutting through the smug air that has settled into our Dining Hall.

*“In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions  
which a minute will reverse.”*

“If I could come to her defense, to Nemesis’s, anything so that Hendrik’s accusation does not hang in the air—now, now I will speak, now there is a pause and a clinking of forks—

“It’s very clear, what’s possible, what isn’t, here I can tell you very simply...’ And he has begun, now it is too late, he will continue pressing deeper and deeper into the part of her that is hard inside. He sits up straighter in his chair, lifting his hands so he can explain it softly, reducing it so we can understand.

“I sink a little deeper into my chair; I move the banana slices from side to side on the edges of my plate, hoping that this pendular distraction will give me a moment’s rest. Hendrik’s voice is loud, jarring. We are certain, we must be, that he does not notice the difference, or he would stop, and would put us out of this miserable suspension that leaves us hanging, all by threads, above a dim lake of civility, knocking into each other every so often like dolls, and then separating once and again, like chimes. And so we listen to Hendrik’s didacticism, to Natalia’s smug insouciance. That will be the rhythm of this dinner. Unless I might contribute something...

“I start to say something, it has formulated, it is ready. I swallow-

“Ah! Astor comes rushing in, late as usual. There is something about him—he is different than the others who work on his floor. Today he looks determined, tired, but his bright smile inflates the tone of the conversation and the rest leap to match it. Even Hendrik, whose fingers are spread in grand gesticulation, retracts these digits and waves so lightly. Astor and Natalia stand next in line for promotion—they will rise first, from the tedium of our work, and I wonder if perhaps I will be next, if maybe Astor can see. I smile at him as he sits; he sees me, looks to the corner of

the table, and smiles back.

“His coming is accompanied by a new medley of sounds—the organic scraping of wooden chairs on wooden floors, a jovial harmony of passing greetings—only this time they hit the scene like crashing waves, absorbing softly into receding beaches. Now that he is here, perhaps I will say something; but now I cannot. Anything he says will be better; they will wish that he has spoken and not me.

“‘Astor, you’ll know this,’ and Hendrik sweeps him in too. Our respite from this endless didacticism has only lasted for the brief interval of Astor’s arrival, had lifted the uncomfortable particles of the conversation and scooped them into a net like so many mosquitoes swept into a waving trap. Hendrik overturns this proverbial net; releases them again. The mosquitoes settle around us anew, buzzing and humming every which way. ‘Astor, in all the newspaper articles you’ve read over the years, have you ever heard of a camel native to this part of the desert?’

“There are so many inconsistencies that Hendrik does not see (what does it mean to be native, for example, or how far does “ever” extend), but there is one he ignores most of all, one that feels so essential when I breathe: what does it matter, if there is a camel or not, when it matters that Nemesia felt it important to tell the tale of it, when there is an importance in the desire to convey that is not present in the thing that is said?

“No, it was Hendrik’s job (it had been his choice, after all, to work in the *Department of Texts That Have Proven to be of Educational Use and Interest*) to confine himself to explanations of those things that were already certain, to boil them down to their most digestible parts. Hendrik is used to coming at knowledge at its very end—he does not know this part, the dialecticism of logic, the mutual jarring of interpretations churning in tandem until they form one thread, or two. ‘Astor, tell us—could it be, that a camel could have been fenced into ATLAS, unseen by eyes for all these years?’

“Astor looks uncomfortable; it would seem that it is Hendrik’s question that made him so, but I can see that it is something else. I can read him. But I cannot know what it is without the facts (because facts I have very little, I know this, and can only mold what others say, spread their gestures out like a gauze and extend them so that their persons are transparent, bared so clearly that it almost humiliates)—only that the curling of his lip floats on an

emotion that is immaterial, that perhaps even he cannot understand; that he has not decided yet how to respond. But then he says, “I suppose it is possible but not probable that we have always turned our heads, just having missed it,” lightly, as though it were nothing—it would appear to the rest that way.

“Nemesia looks at Astor with pain in her eyes. Astor sees, but he does nothing. I know that he feels shame for a moment, but then lets it pass, lets it slide off of him like everything else because he has seen it, experienced it, categorized it, has already felt guilt for it and has devised its solution and has already moved on to something else.

“He thinks we will not understand; for Hendrik works in education, Jabari in mathematics. It is why I cannot speak to them of the Prufrock I translated yesterday, of the yellow fog that licks dark city streets or of mermaids singing, each to each. I see these mermaids, the tips of their fins disappearing beneath heavy green waters, and the image of the dinner table floats quietly behind these scales. The fourteen languages that course through my fellows’ brains will not help them to decipher the mermaids’ whispers—it is too late for them now, for all of them believe unequivocally that only certain things exist.

“But it is not too late for Avi—I look over at him, and he is lost in the patterns of the ceiling. I cannot hear him from across the table but he looks down every so often and each of his phrases slide into the conversation, are lapped up like still puddles. He waves his fork in the air, his elbows bent on the table, and as he laughs he jams this piece of potato into his mouth. And in his face there is a certain peace, and behind it, a certain terror, and behind that, a belief in the richness of all things. This, this is clear from the way his eyes follow the ceiling patterns and how this is the same to him, as easy and comfortable, and that to him the ceiling is made of the same substance that animates you or me. He follows the patterns in us but they do not bother him. I know this; I can read him.

*“For I have known them all already, known them  
all:-  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons”*

“And here, if I lean forward and look engaged, I might say something. Laulava... I can see the tears rush to little Nemesia’s eyes. She struggles to defend herself, to insert something clever into a conversation that is no longer about camels, and in her fervor, it comes out in a conglomeration of words in a conglomeration of languages, in the grammar of German and the cadence of Korean, in the vocabulary of English, Hindi, Portuguese. ‘None of you cares about Laulava,’ she cries, ‘none of you cares!’

“Just at this moment, Clarence passes by. He has been serving our food; he has heard her, but he hangs his head and pretends that he hasn’t. He is not the one who will scold her. In a matter of seconds, we hear him settle his own plate onto the round table, where he sits with the administration—Amelia, the queen of them all, and Ezdehar, who looks at Clarence with a starving curiosity. Clarence bends down and whispers something to Amelia. He looks back at us as he says it, and I am sure that he looks sad; I can read it from the way that he settles his back into his chair, pretends that he does not remember what he has done, jokes with Ezdehar suddenly and tells himself silently that he has passed along something that has happened to someone whom it concerns, but that he has had very little do with the whole affair, for his part. I can read this in the cringing muscles of his backbone and the tentative creases in his smile.

“Ezdehar looks disappointed, shifting in her seat; I have seen the way she looks lovingly at Clarence as he mumbles through his words, or when he looks off into space and believes he is private with his thoughts.

“Amelia stalks over to our table, grabs Nemesia with a firm grip, scolds her. ‘Nemesia, you will sit with me.’

“Amelia continues to hover above us, scouring for any other hints of rebellion. Astor and Natalia share a glance, and as they do, Jabari notices. Jabari notices all glances because he is a part of none. Now is my moment; they are distracted; it will matter very little what I say, but it will matter that I said it. If I say nothing then I have not been at this dinner. I will be so smoothly erased from the memory of it. But if I say but a single word, it will color all the words after it and all the words before, and the string of conversation will no longer make any sense without my small, but essential, contribution. So I speak: ‘The steak tastes a little juicier than usual, I think, like limes at sunset.’ Immediately I know; that

is not what I meant to say.

*“That is not it at all,  
That is not what I meant, at all.”*

“Astor and Natalia look up from their glance; even Hendrik is confused, for a moment.

“They all wish that it didn’t happen, that I hadn’t spoken. But it will soon be forgotten, because it does not fit, and will not connect to anything before or anything after. Jabari steps in, Jabari who is a man of science...

“If you let the steak marinate for a while longer,’ he explains, to get their attention most certainly, ‘It should be tender about three and a half days from the day you begin.’ We do not like him, but we all believe him. We see no reason that it mustn’t be true, we possess no evidence that four days would be too many and two, atrociously insufficient.

“It is because he speaks with a quiet authority.

*“I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
scuttling across the floors of silent seas.”*

“They will not notice if I leave. I hear guffaws spread through the Dining Hall but I don’t know where they originate; I cannot understand the joke because I have missed it, and now if I laugh, it will be a hoax. And if they ask me later, what was the joke, what did you find most enjoyable, I will be pushed to admit that I hadn’t heard the joke after all. And then what will they think of me, laughing like a deluded maniac, at hearing nothing? No, they will not know this; they cannot. They will remember me neither laughing nor not laughing.

“They will remember me as silent, pondering, and maybe they will wonder about me but they will not know.

“O Laulava!

“I have to leave. I have to leave immediately so that later I can construct a memory that they can neither confirm nor deny. ‘I was out trimming the hedges at the border of the compound,’ I could tell them, or ‘working late in the Puzzle Room.’ ‘I didn’t even come to dinner that night’—even that, they would have to believe it, because I would tell it to them!

“I slip out, and I soon sit upon the sand. The warm yellow of the Dining Hall streams out of the window in blazing squares that sit upon the sand.

“The top of our work-tower looks like a white box in the distance, the culminating peak of a lone, stark verticality erected by our own hands, a decade ago, in the middle of an unknown desert. Outside, the tower is shafted in glass, so that for the four middle hours of the desert afternoon, it acts as a giant, blinding prism. Now in the darkness it is almost invisible, as my fingers trace lines in pulsing yellow squares that sit upon the sand. Next to me, I find young Nemesis, who moves closer to me, her legs folding beneath her.

“So, really, very little has happened since you have left, Lau-lava—only that there were forks, and they clinked.”