

THE UPSIDE-DOWN GLASSES OF THE SWAN PRINCESS

BY

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Chapter One

"To wear one's reading glasses upside-down is to invert perception, thereby freeing the discursive mind for revelations heretofore undreamt."

The pen scratched the words onto the thin sheet of paper which lay across the wooden desk like a damp pair of stockings, held shakily and too-tightly by the slender fingers of the Swan Princess. "*Oh who am I kidding?*" With these words the pen screeched to a halt and dropped to the desktop like Newton's apple, like original sin, like lead. The same slender fingers then grabbed the paper by an edge, crumpled it into a dense mass of dry pulp, and threw it out the open window, where it fell five stories and into the dumpster positioned fortuitously on the street below.

The sky was black and speckled with thousands of points of blue light. Though it was late there was a considerable commotion of street rabble buzzing in the corridors of the city mazes. They spoke of many things, oftentimes through the mediator of a small box, with wires which ran up and into the ears. How far inside the wires went was a question of no small import to the girl with the slender fingers who pondered such things as inverted spectacles as she spent her evenings averting the spectacle of the outside world.

A small desk lamp lit the room, with a green shade of the sort found in public libraries' reading rooms or the studies of elderly women whom the rush of romance somehow passed by in their waning days. The girl's face remained in darkness, her hands emerging from the shadows and into the lamp light clutching writing implements and the tails of tigers, both of which squirmed and challenged the authority of her grip with each contortion. Ink and matted fur, disinterested yet antagonistic conversations, were the rule.

Chapter Two

"The inversion of reality brought about by the wearing of one's reading glasses upside-down is purely *symbolic*. This is the key, and it is this, our everlasting susceptibility to the bacchanalian intoxication of the symbolic, which allows for the actual epiphany."

Slender fingers create words with the aid of simple tools: ink and a means of dispersing it in a

straight line. She was cold but refused to shut the window. The heat emitted by a 60 watt light bulb is meager, to say the least, but she found that if she dropped her pen long enough to grab hold of it with her hand for no more than a second or two, her entire body would feel a jolt of warmth which, mixed with the prevailing cold of the room like a drop of blood in shark-infested waters, she found invigorating.

Attempting to conjure, with her writer's implement, the sorrows of young Werther, she found herself again and again having to settle for the clinical assertions of an aging Lacan. Still, she felt she was making some sort of headway, and that she should simply have faith and allow the words to take the lead. It was her twenty-second birthday, and she told no one. She preferred the desk chair to the bar stool, the tea mug to the beer stein, the chatter of her own thoughts to the chitchat of those her age.

Her thoughts were much older than she was.

She had discovered this extraordinary fact through writing, and she knew she could not stop now, traveling backwards in time as she was on a caravan of sentences which stretched out before her mind's eye to a horizon dominated by an iridescent sunrise. Her body ached and awaited the final word on the matter.

Chapter Three

The Mickey Mouse watch lying on the desk read 11:59 p.m. on the night of her twenty-second birthday.

"What a relief," she sighed. "I thought this day would never end." Now that it was, in fact, ending, she could see clearly that the coming year held wonders in store for her, trials she could not as yet comprehend. She was arrested by visions. She stood before a pair of enormous marble pillars, naked save for the glasses on her face, which she wore upside-down. The landscape was barren, a blank page, desolate save for the golden light which shot from the blinding dawn. The infant sun rose, haloed by a rainbow. She looked up to see birds flying east. She craned her neck to follow their purposeful trajectory and her eyes were led, purposefully, back to the pillars. She felt the gaze of Janus upon her, laughing and crying, his simultaneous lament and celebration of our ignorance which has led us to separate past and future with the sharp blade of our blindness. Her hair was lifted from her shoulders by an easterly wind, revealing a chest which rose and fell with an anxiety and an expectation of crystals shattering after a fall of several thousand years.

Gripped by a sudden dread, she reached for the watch, which now read 12:03, and flung it out the open window of her dimly-lit apartment with one fluid motion. Still breathing heavily, she reached for a pen and proceeded to scrawl the words which she now began to regard as terrifying. Not just these words, but any words, began to have this effect on her.

"The bridge of my nose itches. Something is not right with the word order. All the words are there, but they are mixed up, badly. . ."

Chapter Four

"Symbols rule the world. Symbols rule the world. Symbols rule the. . ."

She wrote with a pen, but was herself beginning to feel more like a word processor. She didn't know what to do. Something was welling up inside of her. She felt like a tea kettle set atop a nuclear reactor.

Filled with an irresistible urge, she suddenly stood up from the desk, ripping her body from the halo of lamp light like a scab from an elbow, ran out the front door of her apartment, sped, practically tumbling headlong, down five flights of stairs, and burst out of the building into the midnight air. The stars glittered overhead, but she was down below. Besides, the much-nearer streetlights, in their plastic casings, overpowered those distant nuclear furnaces by a ratio of at least a hundred to one.

At that moment she spied a girl of about her age walking alone in a polka-dotted coat and fishnet stockings, her hair dyed a very literal shade of blue, like a plastic tarp. Out of this passing girl's ears, past dangling earrings shaped like the "recycling" logo, ran two white wires, which converged at the base of her rib cage, the resultant single wire then finding its rest in a small, shiny white box affixed to a belt loop on her coat.

Still panting from her lightning-like descent of the stairs, the image of an apple with a single bite taken out of it flashed in her mind. She approached the blue-haired stranger, blocking her path like a felled oak, and before either knew what had happened she yanked the wires from the blue-haired girl's ears and yelled, "*SYMBOLS RULE THE WORLD!*" Their eyes met for several strange seconds, then she repeated in a whisper, "*Symbols rule the world. . .*"

Chapter Five

The Swan Princess stared into the painted eyes of the strange girl with blue hair, petrified, delirious and exultant all at once. She found herself acutely aware of the moon's creeping course from black horizon to black horizon. Similarly, the cityscape seemed to be melting slowly like an ice sculpture, neither progression visible to the naked eye, yet somehow *known*. The blue-haired girl stood motionless as well, not out of fear, per se, but as a result of her brain's sheer inability to draw upon past experience to formulate a reaction, any reaction.

Finally the Swan Princess looked down at her right hand to see the white wires which had been plucked like weeds from the girl's effete ears only moments prior, and *ran*. She ran inside her apartment building, slamming the door behind her, and ascended the five flights of stairs like a zigzagging rocket, not realizing that she still clutched the wires until she was back in her apartment with the dead bolt latched. She then darted to the window, looked down at that shock

of blue still frozen in place beside the dumpster on the sidewalk below, and tossed the two-pronged wires out into the open air, where they hit the ground with a minute clunk just in front of the girl's scuffed tennis shoes.

The girl then bent down slowly and deliberately, scooped up the wires, replaced them with care, one ear at a time, arched her head in the direction of the Swan Princess' window high above, and screamed, "ARE YOU CRAZY? PEOPLE DON'T *DO* THAT! DO YOU HEAR?? THEY JUST ***DON'T DO THAT!!***" Standing alone in a dark room, at these words the Swan Princess suddenly regained her composure, reclaiming that delicious lucidity which the heterodox social interaction had promised in the first place, and promptly fainted.

Chapter Six

Lying curled up like a kitten beside the open window, her long hair shifted in the cold breeze as she, herself, shifted periodically in the moonlight.

She slept for twenty-three hours.

All through the night and following day her dreams seemed to be evolving along some manner of logical progression. For instance, the first cycle of dreams she experienced was composed of nothing but text. Enigmatic phrases such as "*the concept of inconceivability*" and "*the reality of the unreal world*" whizzed across a black abyss before a disembodied spectator (her), sometimes interacting with each other, spinning about in cyclones of letters which stabilized into new variations, sometimes staying with her for extended periods, as if making certain she had ample time to ponder the mysteries posed fully and profoundly.

From these semantic *mise-en-scènes* eventually evolved a slightly higher form of symbolic representation, that of a sort of pictographic world in which all objects and beings were also their own signifiers. The appearance of a being was akin to the reading of its name. This produced many wholly alien and not-unpleasant readings of dreamscapes by a dreaming subject who was, herself, a pictogram to be read, though when she attempted such an auto-reading nothing was accomplished save a vague, ticklish sensation all over her "body."

Next, the dreamworld of forms began to take on a mass and a definition many times fuller and more vivid than that of the waking world. Each object, for example, an altar she nearly tripped over while exploring a dense jungle positively dripping with life and animation, seemed to possess a hyperreality which could only be compared to that of a self-contained universe. Running her fingers along the altar's surface, its finite mass seemed to extend infinitely, though across a space no larger than that occupied by her own body.

Chapter Seven

She moved her arm from side to side, and each time she did so it felt as if it were undertaking the voyage, like some galactic space-faring vessel, from one edge of the universe to the other. Her body was light-years across, an incalculable mass. Or was it that her body *was* the universe? Perhaps one of those motions of her arm actually took several thousand, million, or even billion years to complete, a aeon experienced by her as lasting no more than a few seconds?

Suddenly the sensation of infinite mass abandoned her and she found herself amid the ruins of a once-great metropolis. Massive skyscrapers lay strewn across jagged piles of shattered asphalt roadway like rows of dominos. Subway trains slept, twisted and deformed, fallen into patterns which reminded her of a diviner's yarrow stalks.

The grim fate they divulged was clear.

Spatters of blood dotted the still-smoldering piles of rubble which rose before her eyes like infected boils, and she intuited what had happened here. This city had crossed the line. It had died of pompousness. Drunk on the wine of its own otherworldly success, it had allowed itself to forget the natural world from whence it had sprung, and Hypnos had returned to rouse the sorry somnambulist from its sleep of ages.

Not knowing what else to do, she sat at the base of a rubble pile and began to dig idly. After only a few minutes she found the first body. She had removed a large stone, probably the largest she would care to attempt to budge, and out it fell: a limp arm in a blackened and bloodied business suit, followed by the poor soul's dangling head. His jaw hung agape, dislocated. His glasses, worn right-side-up, lenses shattered, were otherwise intact.

Chapter Eight

After discovering the first, she began to see corpses everywhere. Whatever the exact circumstances that led to this city's demise, the deathblow seemed to strike swiftly.

Billboards, actors with a thousand faces, had fallen from great heights only to find their final roles upon the hard surface of the earth as cubist caricatures of their former promises of transcendence. She stared at one intently. It lay broken and bent beside the base of some Art Deco ruins, its absurdly happy faces looming taller than her entire body. Even in their proper context these jubilant, colorful images had more than a little of the grotesque about them. They seemed to possess the power to sap any true joy from hapless onlookers who failed to question their esoteric motives. Perhaps this city was destroyed as a last-ditch effort to eradicate an infestation of "visual pollution" which had become completely unmanageable.

She wandered the ruins for what seemed like hours, past a tangled suspension bridge half submerged in tranquil waters, past gaping, smoking holes in the streets which revealed the subway tunnels below, past rotting fruit carts manned by dismembered vendors, past traffic

lights whose poles had become tied together like bows, and finally past an unbroken mirror.

She halted as she noticed this last sight in her periphery, an unblemished, full-length mirror leaning against a gutted structure from which small pockets of fire still burned, and turned to face it. It was only then that she became aware of the fact that she was completely naked, save for a pair of thick-framed reading glasses which rested upside-down upon the bridge of her nose, their arms pointing upward instead of hooking around the backs of the ears. Throughout these nocturnal adventures, she had been profoundly concerned with the *being* of her physical self, but never the *image*. Psychoanalytically speaking, nakedness made sense, but the glasses?

Chapter Nine

The mirror's frame was gilded and ornate. It leaned at a slight angle against a cracked wall that looked as though it could be toppled with but a breath, creating the illusion that she was viewing herself from a position lower than herself. This disjunction, the idea of being lower than oneself, even if ever so slightly, allowed for an objectivity which mirrors don't often bestow. Her hair was dirty and tangled, yet her skin appeared to glow like polished marble, tarnished only here and there by the soot and ash which traveled upon the air currents like too-late divine harbingers, now only *reminders* of doom. Her breasts were like two brave little soldiers, standing guard at either side of the rib cage, entryway to the throne room of the heart.

As she examined herself acutely, lost in a schoolgirl's *parousia*, a sudden strong gust of wind, which had twisted its way through the barren canyons of the dead city to the very spot where she and the mirror faced each other, roared past and deposited a thick blanket of grey ash which covered her, the mirror, and everything else in the vicinity.

She coughed and coughed, struggling, through the fits, to wipe her glasses clean with her hair. Only partially successful, she replaced them upside-down upon her face, *always upside down*. . .

Now sharing its bloodless, morbid palette, she had become one with the landscape.

Only the two tiny lenses of her glasses, wiped clean, and the alert eyes behind them, served to distinguish her from the otherwise thorough desolation stretching in all directions, as all other windows had been shattered, leaving, at best, piles of shards, at worst, pulverized grains of sand. She searched for the mirror, sifting through grey dunes and piles of rock, but found only body parts and shredded fiber-optic cables. She collapsed into herself and began to weep, and weep.

Chapter Ten

The tears flowed down her cheeks, washing away some of the ash which caked itself upon her entire body, creating a miniature Nile River Delta beneath each red eye. Crying seemed the last

recourse available in this necropolis of foggy comprehension. Why was she here? What happened?

Something was wrong.

The sun was beginning to set upon the hellish scene, the lavenders and golds of an indifferent, yet somehow sentient-seeming sky, marked the desolation with their ribbons of warmth diminished.

Wiping the tears from each cheek a dark, clay-like substance formed as the liquid sorrow mixed with the dry ash, which she flung from her fingertips in quick motions. She looked at the resultant little clay balls where they fell, lodged in the grey ash like meteors frozen at the instant of impact with a colorless moon.

So absorbed in grieving contemplation was this ash-covered girl that she nearly failed to notice a deep shadow gliding across the earth, eventually covering the clay balls in darkness. Once she saw it she looked up slowly, following the shadow back to its source, and found herself face to face with a huge beast!

Its face was so close to hers that she was overwhelmed by its hot breath as it cycled onto her face and steamed her glasses. Staggering backwards, she stumbled over a broken fire hydrant and fell onto her bare behind.

The beast stood, almost motionless, breathing steadily and following her with its black, shiny eyes. In fact, the creature was black all over. Its face was proud and modeled with the contours of a harsh wisdom; all around it sprung a thick mane of pitch black, lustrous fur. Its body was strong, its four paws anchored to the shifting grey ash like pillars in a temple upon sand.

Chapter Eleven

It was a lion, but its presence suggested not so much a creature as a black hole, blotting out the stars with an inexplicable negativity completely at odds with our positivistic conception of the cosmos. Its coat and mane were black, yet iridescent, catching the fleeting rays of the setting sun like peacocks in its jaws, sending shimmering feathers flying, a thousand shifting colors before a neutral backdrop.

The girl, heroine of this exercise in narrative abstraction, overcoming her considerable fear, stood up to face the terrifying creature eye to eye. In his eyes she found herself confronted with a synthesis, surely alchemical in nature, of pride, intelligence, melancholy and something else, something as yet unclear.

The beast, chest rising and falling, nostrils emitting blasts of steam like an engine, stood before her as if awaiting her next move. She sensed this, and, overcoming a certain embarrassment, spoke to the creature.

"Hello," she began hesitantly, "I am a stranger in this terrible land. I don't know how I got here. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Everyone here is dead. Can you help me?"

The Black Lion remained silent just long enough for the girl to feel foolish at expecting a verbal response from an animal, then his snout began to form these words: "Young girl, we have found each other not by chance, but through a mutual need. This need is the point, the set of coordinates, at which the perpendicular paths of our existences cross, like a constellation. From your limited vantage point, seen through the bars of your tiny temporal cages, the constellations seem eternal, but they, too, are merely travelers passing in the night, assemblages of chance and necessity, causality and will, which are one. I am. . .glad that we have met."

Chapter Twelve

The girl considered the form standing solemnly before her, a bronze monument blackened by countless seasons of acid rain.

His lustrous, velvet coat revealed the inner workings of his body, its skeletal pistons pumping with a fluidity that she found to be exceptionally beautiful. She watched his movements, sparse yet captivating, as he asked her, "What is your name, my dear?"

This question startled her, as if at that moment she felt the stirring of some buried memory making its first attempt to claw out of a premature entombment deep within her.

"My name. . .well, I'm the Swan Princess." She curtsied playfully (though she was naked and therefore in no position to do so), and offered her hand in a gesture of greeting. She felt her fears gradually departing (though, in that wasteland, there was no reason why they should), replaced by a vague uneasiness, a disorientation.

"Ah, then I am in the presence of *royalty*. . ." The black lion's voice was deep and rough, though wielded delicately, a forest fire clearing the way for spring's renewal.

"Of sorts. My lineage is mysterious, yet pure." She adjusted her upside-down glasses, a nervous gesture meant to assuage the slight embarrassment caused by such strange words.

The sensation that this was somehow all wrong grew in her. It was not simply the nightmarish fact of the destroyed city, with its corpses piled high, that disturbed her. No, the anxiety stemmed from elsewhere, from *below* these things.

"Once, as recently as yesterday, in fact, this cosmopolis was known as *New York City*, jewel of the risen Atlantis. Today, alas, it is fallen, is fallen. You are a mess, your majesty. Allow me to assist you how I can." Before she had the chance to protest the lion began to lick her with his massive tongue, removing the grey ash which covered her.

Chapter Thirteen

The girl attempted, to no avail, to suppress the laughter as the black lion's tongue lapped and lapped her ash-strewn figure. Soon she was completely clean, sparkling like a newborn, laughing like a child.

The lion spoke: "Princess of the Swans, mistress to the spell of words, *we have met before*. Many times, in fact. Each time in a different place. Once upon a barren Aeoulian desert, beside a sighted pyramid. Another time in your own bedroom, where a chestnut tree sprang up, in-itself, from the floorboards. Yet again in the company of your departed grandmother, whom even now your being moves toward. Each time we have something new to impart to one another. Each time the contest begins anew."

"*Contest?*" inquired the girl, catching her breath.

The beast grinned. "Of course, my dear. All is contest. Are we, titans of this astral realm, to be exempt? Look around you. This city, this monument to nothingness, has now achieved this status in actuality, and not merely symbolically. This city, this pile, is all that remains of a will which failed to will to the very end. In the end it chose suicide, though a coward's suicide, passing the short blade off to another with the stomach to dispatch such a weakling. Will this meeting truly pass, like the others, leaving no mark upon the for-itself of your consciousness, *abstraction which is what it is not?*"

At these striking words, and behind upside-down glasses, the girl's pearl-like eyes opened wide and wondrous. "*I'm dreaming,*" she whispered.

Now it was the lion's turn to laugh.

"Very good, my dear, very good," he said. "*Become what you are not. . .*"

Overcome by exhilaration, these last words barely registered with the young dreamer. She began to float, drifting further and further from the lion and the ravaged cityscape.

Chapter Fourteen

The girl looked down as the Black Lion, along with the charred earth upon which he stood, receded into the distance. As a kind of farewell, the creature roared heavenward: "*You must suffer one last dream, do you hear me, my lovely little princess? I, Samael, do prophesy!*"

Did she hear him? The answer is unclear, speeding away as she did, piercing the clouds with the rubber bullet of her body. She flew toward the golden light of the sun, forgetting the lion and his cryptic words completely in the warm bath of the gloaming.

"*I'm dreaming,*" she said aloud, finding herself possessed of an intoxicating clarity of vision.

The sky was empty.

The sky contained, *was*, a vast emptiness, blue, pink and gold for the light which ricocheted to and fro against imperceptible particles.

The particles did not exist.

She looked at her hands. These slender hands did not exist.

She perceived that she was experiencing, acting out, the very essence of awareness, yet she found it hard to move beyond the simple articulation "*I'm dreaming.*" For the moment it was all she needed.

The clouds that surrounded her were the most beautiful things she had ever seen. She thought of stopping to examine them further, but the attraction of the giant, magnificent and radiant orb ahead proved too great. She moved horizontally, though her momentum was such that it may as well have been straight down, into the sun's gravitational dominion. She understood that this was all in her mind, that her mind was the one thing that *did* exist in this primordial galaxy, but the pull of the sun was not diminished for this knowledge.

The sun did not exist. *Did the sun exist?*

As she disappeared into its white light, she pondered the two mutually-exclusive hypotheses.

Chapter Fifteen

Leviathan. The girl's subconscious mind had risen from the depths, revealed itself in the full light of day. That was how she understood it.

Leviathan. She began to see the instability of words, how they wobble around the signifier, always, at best, merely approximating its location on a great conceptual or existential lattice. Words were pixels determining the resolution of the perceptible world. Unfortunately, more often than not one hits a wall of irreducible pixilation long before reaching one's destination, a journey for which the words are only tools meant to facilitate safe passage.

Once again, she didn't know where she was. She was surprised to find herself clothed in a white summer dress of very soft fabric, upon which was printed a pattern of red gloxinias intertwined with the curling figures of foxes. Her hair, combed and shiny, was pulled back in pigtails which brushed her shoulders. Her feet were bare. Upon her face were her usual thick-framed reading glasses, worn upside-down.

Leviathan. Was this the belly of the beast? Are words the glasses prescribed by an overeager optometrist, a crutch which actually impedes the flawless functioning of healthy eyeballs by allowing their muscles to relax a bit too much? The sun hung low in the sky, its white light

blanketing the landscape like a silk tablecloth. Though the light was overpowering, the girl could make out the faint signature of a rainbow circling the sun. The dark silhouettes of some birds could also be seen flying into the haze.

As her eyes adjusted to the light, she witnessed the appearance of two marble pillars which were once as tall as cedars, but which were now broken, their mass scattered across the ground in boulders and pebbles. Their two bases, however, still stood taller than her. She approached and, reaching out her hand, touched one of the two, feeling the rough, pockmarked marble against the grain of the grooves.

Leviathan.

Chapter Sixteen

The girl was crouched over the sand, writing in it with her finger. She wrote a sentence, then wiped it clean, forgetting entirely the content of the recently-redacted sentiment.

"Time is a confusing loop of language."

"Time is an elusive knot, a stoppage in the arteries of nothingness."

"Time is a disease of the heart of existence."

Between you and me, these are some of the sentences she dirtied the tip of her index finger to construct. This is the dramatic irony of other people's dreams.

Between the shadows of the two ruined pillars, aligned with the sunset, white as *Paradiso*, the girl in the white dress looked up and saw a figure which had not been there a moment before. It was difficult to make out any features. The figure, backlit by infinity, making it infinitely dark, appeared as nothing more than the barest approximation of a human form, a head and a long torso. Her finger froze mid-sentence.

The figure was unhurriedly walking toward her, and as it did she saw that the minimal form which she perceived was the silhouette of hooded robes, a smooth and gently curving arc which rose from the ground like a bell. Once the figure stood between the crumbling columns it removed its hood and looked down at her, and she up at it, squinting. It was a man.

Though he appeared somewhat young, his hair was white. Rather, not white, but a sort of blue, metallic and glimmering. His robes were brown and threadbare, patched here and there with material of slightly mismatched color and texture. His face was beardless and appeared soft. Rather than stand up to face the visitor she plopped her behind down onto the ground and positioned herself casually below him, as if this time it were up to *her* to await a reaction from her mysterious visitor.

Chapter Seventeen

The pale orange light of the sun shone through the fabric of the girl's dress showing the outline of her rounded calves.

The robed man who stood above her, whose clasped hands were concealed beneath the folded drapery of long sleeves, cleared his throat. To this the girl looked up, expecting speech of some sort. When it failed to manifest, she went back to her drawings in the sand. Again, the man cleared his throat. The girl's finger stopped abruptly. She was becoming annoyed, though determined not to show it. She felt as though she had been at the mercy of the whims of others for a thousand years as she floated through the archetypes of her soul.

She was dreaming, though whether she was aware of the fact at that moment is an issue which has quietly fallen outside of the bounds of this allegorical "narrative abstraction." A more urgent question would be this: when she is awake, is she aware that she is dreaming? In any event, and moving on from such meta-fictive speculation, the man did, indeed, speak:

"I am terribly sorry to disturb you, but I find myself overcome by curiosity. Would you do a humble servant of God the honor of telling me what it is that you are writing in the sand, knowing full well that the winds will sweep it away in a matter of minutes?"

Looking downward to conceal the fact, the girl smiled. She always welcomed an audience for her words.

"Well, if you *must* know," she pantomimed, "I am composing a series of short, pointed verses in the tradition of the *Imagist school of Ezra Pound*." It was an explanation worthy of poetry workshop. Satisfied with the learned quality of her response, she waited for the fish to tug at the line. The sun was setting fast as she prepared herself for the recitation which must surely follow.

Chapter Eighteen

The girl read the stranger some of her sand poems. All the while the man, who now sat cross-legged before her, listened attentively, resting his chin on a clenched fist as he considered every word and clause. Meanwhile the girl was becoming more amiable with each verse, and soon she was glad to have some company other than those two toppled pillars whose tone-deaf ears couldn't possibly appreciate her exceptional lyrical gifts. The sun touched the distant horizon, across the flat land, and began to shrink. Within seconds it was night, and a canopy of stars appeared as if someone, somewhere had flipped a switch.

"Oh my," hiccuped the girl, "I've been so self-absorbed. . ."

The monk interjected, "Not at all. Monks such as myself, renunciants amidst the lush

instrumentation of God's symphony-like universe, are accustomed to listening for great stretches without comment. Just listening and listening. There is, after all, so much to hear, and your poems have filled my heart with great joy this day."

The girl blushed the color of the foxes printed on her white dress. "Oh, do you mean it? You are very kind. . ."

"*Johannes*," stated the monk. "My name is Brother Johannes of Grasmere, student and guardian of holy books, willing slave of the Anointed One."

"I'm the Swan Princess," the girl said sadly, "But I. . ."

"Do not believe." In a short period of time the monk Johannes had become quite adept at finishing the young woman's sentences.

Looking away, the girl answered, "That's right."

Johannes pondered this for a moment and said, "If I may be so forward as to ask, what, then, *do* you believe?"

Adjusting her upside-down, thick-framed reading glasses, the girl said, "I believe that I exist, and that the world exists. That's really the extent of it. Um, I believe that nothingness surrounds us, and that to stark nothingness we shall return. . ."

Chapter Nineteen

"There is water nearby," Brother Johannes stated dispassionately. "Are you thirsty?"

The girl, still feeling somewhat uncomfortable after her frank admission of philosophical atheism to a monk, welcomed the change of subject. "Thirsty?" she knelled, "Why. . .yes. . .now that you mention it, my throat *does* feel a bit parched." She put her hand to her neck. "Strange. I feel as though I've been inhaling ash from. . . from. . ."

"The incense of the world?" offered the monk.

"Maybe," said the girl in the white dress glumly.

"Very well, a cool drink for the pretty girl !" Before she knew what had happened, the monk snatched the upside-down glasses from the girl's face and, raising them into the air with a firm grip, he then swung them down to the ground, piercing the dry earth with one of their arms and in the process smashing the glasses to bits.

The Swan Princess gasped. She felt a minuscule panic bubble within her like a stomach ache, a panic that grew and grew until finally she exclaimed, "ARE YOU CRAZY? PEOPLE DON'T DO THAT! DO YOU HEAR?? THEY JUST ***DON'T DO THAT!!!***"

Then she froze. The words, which she had just allowed to burst forth while overcome with rage at the presumptuous monk, reverberated within her like an echo in a dark cave. Her fury was overtaken by a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, a dread.

Johannes looked at her calmly and said, "Remember, the words of others, which you use to condemn them, are of the same language from which you build your towers to the sky."

At that moment a low rumble became audible from the ground between the two dream pilgrims where the glasses lay, frames bent and lenses shattered, and suddenly a huge geyser erupted therefrom, splintering the earth beneath their feet.

Chapter Twenty

Water spouted forth from the ruptured earth, rising high into the starry sky. The spray from this roaring pillar glittered like a second Milky Way, crossing the first and raining down upon the monk called Brother Johannes of Grasmere and the girl called the Swan Princess, each seeking cover respectively behind one of the two broken marble columns. Both soon realized, however, that the water was warm and pleasant, and its complete avoidance was not really necessary.

The girl, face bereft of the indispensable adornment of her reading glasses, was too bewildered for words. Now soaked, her white dress clung tightly to her skin as she hugged the pillar with both arms and slid rapidly down its slick surface to the ground. Standing beside the other column, Johannes donned his coarse hood and lowered his gaze.

"What kind of sick baptism *is* this?" the girl yelled desperately against the howl of the waterspout, "I would write about this if it weren't all so incoherent!"

"This," Johannes intoned, "is, indeed, your *baptism*. The vanity of the world has been surpassed within you, washed away, though you will not fully come to know the fruit of this joyous transformation for many years."

Seen through the cascade which rained down with increasing ferocity, the girl faded in and out of sight like the moon behind curtains of rain. "I don't understand!" she pleaded. "Please. . ." she stammered, then blurted out, "please help me to see the sights which are as yet unseen!"

The words surprised her more than they did Johannes, who simply responded, "You will see it on the television, as a cat rests contentedly in your lap. When the abomination shows itself within the temple, flee Babylon. When the abomination speaks, demanding worship, flee Babylon, not stopping to collect your notebook. *Flee!*"

To this last cautionary monosyllable the Swan Princess awoke with a start, finding herself on her apartment floor.

Chapter Twenty-One

The girl awoke to find herself curled up like a kitten below the open window, her hair shifting in the cool breeze like sand dunes below the ambivalent moon. She stirred slowly, stretching her arms wide and rubbing her eyes with her knuckles.

Glancing at the digital clock lying upside-down on the floor beside her writing desk, she saw, with fuzzy vision, that it was 11:11 p.m. How was that possible, she wondered, since that would make it earlier than when she fell asleep? *Unless*, she realized, *I slept all day long*. . .

That was it. It was now nearly twenty-four hours since she collapsed in a manic exhaustion onto the floor of her apartment. This fact, which could easily have been interpreted as troubling, did not bother her in the least. She felt a rare tranquility crawling across her skin, manifesting itself in the form of goose pimples. It was a feeling she wished could last forever, a bodily mysticism in which she felt that she fit into her intangible cosmic slot comfortably and with ease, even if her social slot was still as ill-fitting as ever. Her mind seemed to blend seamlessly with her body, and her emotions with her thoughts, in that warm feeling. In fact, this could be said to be its most accurate description: the melding of all perception and experience into a single feeling.

Draping herself in a blanket from the pile of laundry that served as her bed, she moved to the kitchen to prepare a cup of matcha tea. Samurai used to drink this bright green concoction, before heading into battle, for its power to enhance alertness, and the young woman, alone in her squared-off allotment of the vast western city, desired this benefit for herself.

Feeling exceptionally well-rested, she had the entire night in which to write. It was a battle, of sorts, or a contest.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The girl removed the reading glasses from her face, setting them upside-down atop the scattered papers on the desk. She rubbed the bridge of her nose with thumb and forefinger, closing her eyes and thinking about the people of the outside world, the people with white wires running out of their ears and into tiny boxes.

"To wear one's reading glasses upside-down is to invert perception, thereby freeing the discursive mind for revelations heretofore undreamt."

The words made her smile, but hadn't she written them before? No matter, all words repeat with time. As she crossed her bridge of dreams, many such revisionary decisions were sure to follow

like streamers, a colorful parade of dangling possibilities. The night was still, as was her mind. Her mind was still, as was the night. Were these true statements? Somehow, she believed that all statements were true. Each had its analog somewhere out there in the wide universe of dreams. As she rubbed the bridge of her nose where the thick frames of her glasses left little red marks, she knew she had plenty of dream residue with which to work. She knew, also, that she had to work quickly, because it was fading fast.

Coda: When she was sixteen, she used to save her fingernail clippings and put them into the cups of her bra as an act of penance for failing to live up to Rimbaud's vision of the liberated and enlightened poet-woman of the future. She never had too much of a stomach for physical discomfort, so this was the worst she could imagine subjecting herself to. All day long at school her chest itched, preoccupying her and making the boys think she was uptight. Except for the occasional sigh, she bore her burden of loneliness in silence.

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