



Quantum Surge in O Central

Tom Whalen

Quantum Surge in O Central

BOOKS BY TOM WHALEN

The Eustachia Stories

The Camel's Back (with Michael Presti)

Roithamer's Universe

A Newcomer's Guide to the Afterlife

(with Daniel Quinn)

Elongated Figures

Winter Coat

Quantum Surge in O Central

short stories

TOM WHALEN

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Contents

- After the Rain 7
- The Vampire's Assistant 11
- Hotel Ortolan 16
- Jorinda and Joringel 26
- Quantum Surge in O Central 29

After the Rain

Children congregate around the puddles and point to the reflection of the planes crashing at the water's edges. The movie houses are full, but nothing new is showing, ushers pass baskets for the patrons whose pets have died. The election is over, a new election is beginning. I myself am not very hopeful, but I continue reporting. The head surgeon observes the patient spread out on the table before him. The patient's hands are covered with the tracks of extinct animals, his smile is wooden, he coughs blood that looks more like a river of grape seeds than blood. It has been said that before the rains came we were happier, but our calculators couldn't talk, milk spoiled after a few days, I saw a camel smeared on the pavement by a bulldozer. I tried to forget that qualitative changes had occurred, I tried to forget other things as well. The ordeal of the forests, for example, the day the limbs billowed then collapsed, newspaper accounts, the sirens on the river banks. The disease of the dead mothers spread like a fog through the city, pancreatic breakdown, it was said, acid dissolving the surrounding organs. Marketing goes on. I was pushing my

basket down the aisle lined with charcoal bags and wood chips when a little girl in gray hood placed herself in front of me and tried to sell me a noise dampener. "What?" I asked her. "*Gestern nacht war die Luft so weich, so still,*" she said. "Ja," I replied, "*gestern.*" I thought I could see little car wheels spinning in her nostrils. It is known that the extinction of the rare, warm, kind women would have occurred regardless, but in Travtervere at four you can see the arms of naked women dropping like rain down gullies. It is darker by a few degrees, dawns are crepuscular. The commonest expression on the streets is "Pay up." The little girl blushed, told me her name was Ines. I lifted her into my basket and gave her a ride through the dimly lit aisles. Heavy winged shapes invade in clusters so dense no light can seep through. Big soft circles of poisonous gas envelop the subway holes. Again and again, at the beach, in the taxi, in the corridors of the hospital, I encounter images of locomotives. *Wie ist die Erde schön,* the children leaning over the puddle chant. *Wie ist die Erde schön.* Aquarium salesmen are doing brisk business on the sidewalks of Columbus. Melancholy hands at each corner proffer bouquets. And the next moment all the church bells begin to ring, they are being carried away in carts pulled by the radiated mules, whose teeth are as soft as loam. The head surgeon flips through the text, but it's all in hieroglyphs and the hieroglyphs are badly printed and faded gray like the sky. The night nurse has a disabled limp. I saw her crouched on the escalator, but the escalator wasn't moving, and a spray of black balls shot from her hands. "We are in agreement that the operation is delicate," she said. On the dark balconies, a deadly perfume, another catastrophe, originating from who knows where. A little bird wobbles in the nurse's thick hair as if it were dying. The head surgeon taps the tip of the thermometer on his teeth, his eyes gaze out as if into the middle

ground of a Friedrich landscape. He wants to speak, a syllable vibrates within him like a muscle, but instead he unwraps the bandages around his patient's head. But there is no head there, only a white light like milk illuminated by headlights. On Canal lead-colored pills are disseminated to sidewalk vendors, the atmosphere is "clean." I followed a monk with a candle and tambourine in his hands through a portico and into a small arena where hundreds of children or dwarves on their knees chewed what appeared to me to be eyes. "This is the voluptuous City," the monk told me. "There is no frenzy of doubt here. These children are luminous in their sadness." I waded through their flesh as if through waves. Regarding the suburbs, I file the following: Everyone moves about like actors subdued by sleeping pills. The broken columns rise from the pavement at forty-five degrees. Huge horses stand beneath them holding them up with their backs. The lawns are littered with stage props and the sky looks like it has been wheeled into place by cartographers. Sign painting has been disallowed. An ordinance also reminds everyone on every telephone pole that it is to be understood that conditions are being looked into, warnings posted, the emergence of pools charted and analyzed. Ducks wander the alleys like drunks. People who can stand are let out until eleven o'clock, but after that the geodetic triangle is slipped into place and, to the great consternation of the curfew breakers, the blue lights are turned on—lips grow cold, deep blue circles form beneath the eyes. A super-potent elixir is being searched for, the new regime tells us. Last week the assistant shop clerks lost their tongues. Bulldozers are filling the gorge in the center of the city as fast as they can, but they can't keep pace with the increase in detritus. My own arms seem shorter today than yesterday, and I've noticed another physiological peculiarity: barefooted men in military dress with three toes. On the Rue de Gare I saw naked

teenagers, their bodies greased and covered with saran wrap, queuing outside butcher shop. "*Pourquoi rester si longtemps ensevili sous les décombres des jours et de la nuit?*" I asked, but they only stared at me with vacant eyes from behind their plastic shrouds. In the corridors of the hospital, cartloads of babies, or what I take to be babies, wrapped in surgical tape. The nurses drool a curious yellow liquid that flickers in the dark like a dying neon bulb. They waddle in and out of rooms on whose doors someone has spray-painted "No Admittance." Sometimes I wander the corridors for hours without encountering anyone, then deep within the hospital's bowels, I come upon the head surgeon. We nod to one another, but neither of us ever says a word. The proper experiments are being undertaken by the proper authorities, we are told. The terror of living is not the result of the rain, but comes from the neuronc landscape at the threshold of our dreams; stop changing that, and the world, too, will stop changing. I myself have neither slept nor dreamed in several days, but I continue reporting.

The Vampire's Assistant

He wants us to do what? Find him a what? A victim? What sort? Human? Male? Female? How old did you say? That young? What does he expect of us? Are we miracle workers or are we an assistant? Assistant? To the vampire? Well? What can we do about it? Specifications? Red hair? Now where the hell are we going to find a redhead at this time of the evening? In the Hauptbahnhof? The Hauptbahnhof? Well? Not likely? That's what you told him? And? He's what? Old? An old what? Old but terrifying? Terrifying but old? Can't take no for an answer? He's a what? An old hoary vampire? You tell him that? You didn't? From previous verbal engagements, in the gloaming (the what?), the shade cast by the velvet canopy in his boudoir (his what?), boudoir with fur-lined walls (with what? animal fur? is there any other kind? rabbit? rat?), him with tea cup in hand, the one with the leaping doe motif, you with teapot, the one with the felled and drained doe motif, at the, as it were, ready, you have suffered, so to speak, the coherent or not syllables of his dissatis-

faction (his what?), his disdain (his what?), his disgust and plopped to your knees in a manner commensurate with his image of your obsequious, curled-lip quiddity?

So you trudged down the hill in the snow and strolled up and down Königstrasse on the alert for redheads and found none in Restaurant Marché and in front of the kebab stand you also found no redheads and in the Kino Gloria you found a pretty little blonde, followed her for a block after the show, but you knew that if you brought back a blonde you would live to regret it, so you kissed figuratively the blonde goodbye and checked out the lassies at Buchhandlung Niedlich and the laddies selling drugs in the Schlossgarten, but though you saw a few yellowheads and a dozen purpleheads and a handful of skinheads with earrings in their eyebrows, you saw none of the heads that would satisfy this evening your master's needs, nuptials, you were dizzy with all this searching, and it was cold, you remember it was cold, snow on the ground, white snow turning blue with the cold, and the pond frozen over like your tongue hanging out from the hole in your face into which one puts objects meant to maintain the metabolism for another day, hour, whatever, minute, make it a minute, you were about to give up, when a policeman tapped you on your shoulder, said his name was Leif Lazlo, which didn't sound German to you, but what's in a name isn't necessarily in a nationality, citizenry, though in Germany there are some peculiar laws regarding citizenship, and Lazlo did not, in the manner of a Prague policeman of some literary renown, say, "Gib's auf!" but instead pointed his police stick, his police truncheon into your thin ribs and said, "Weitergehen!" which, though your German was not up to snuff, you understood to mean "Shove off!" which you did, but not be-

fore noting his blue eyes for future identification in a dark alley when you, armed with the master's protection, could pummel his Polizei hide into the concrete, and left the park so thinking and shivering in your silk t-shirt, the uniform proscribed by the master, only to find yourself sipping carrot juice at Marktplatz in the Hauptbahnhof and in line behind you at McDonald's you espy a, well I'll be, redhead, female variety, buying a FischMac, of all things, well, so you offer her the latest USA Today, she thanks you, and you chat her up for a while, she's American, sixteen, same age Bukharin's wife was when he fell in love with her, you tell her, god, you need a new patter, but you plunge ahead inspired by the sight of what awaits you if you do not bid the master's wishes, said sight being a tongue or worse lashing and another plate of flies, you know you're supposed to love flies and spiders, but it's not true, you do not love flies and spiders, they do not taste good, they are acidic, they are not crisp, they do not crunch in your mouth like a breakfast cereal, so you spread her with words up one side and with music down the other, and soon, hey, what do you know, you're headed up the hill to your master's apartment, redhead in tow, it's too cold to spend the night in the Hauptbahnhof, her train to Innsbruck doesn't leave until the morning, you can offer a palette, a shower, cable TV, your master is very accommodating, no you do not live alone, you are only an assistant, but the master won't mind, he's a nice man, a little eccentric, how eccentric, fur-lined walls, well, I don't know what kind of fur, not your baby seals, not your foxes, maybe of the large cat variety, you don't know, ask him if you like, animal rights, well, I think he's amenable to the notion, I'm not sure, you could ask, he's into metamorphoses, I know that, likes animals

that can shift from one state of being to another, he's very big on that, god, you're nervous, what if you scare the redhead with her open-faced smile, with her face of freckles, you don't want her to bolt now, you're nearly there, but you can't shut up, you can't keep your mouth closed, even though in every word is implanted the seed of misunderstanding, you can't help but chatter on, hey, hey, he's a nice master, christ, can't you shut up, a nice master, the pay's not so good, nor the benefits, quasi-immortality, contingent upon the whims of the master and the audience, could pluck off my head at the slightest misstep, misspeak, incomprehension, a Mercedes almost clobbers the two of you at the intersection of Kriegsberg and Herdweg, well yes, it is hard to see and you are cold, you say, these silk t-shirts are not the best sort of uniform for this climate, but a warm robe awaits you and her, you say, when you arrive, a velour robe toasting at this moment on the radiator, soon to grace and enrapture and ravish your shoulders, your sockets, your succulence, slippage, the snow swirling in your eyes, eyebrows, a moment longer, not much longer, the hill isn't too steep, whew, yes, a bit steeper than you thought, this hill, wasn't it, well, it can't be helped, nothing is what it seems, but it's done, you're here, the elevator sucks you up into the sky, into the hall, to the door, the key slips in like a knife into butter, and you usher her in?

Only to find what? The room reeking of ammonia like the bat exhibit in the zoo? Your master snoring like a bear on the divan, sated, the remains of his meal burbling on the floor? All your efforts unnecessary, wasted? The search, the abuse, the groveling, the chance encounter, the fear—none of it of any use? Yes? The redhead, appalled at the smeared walls, gasps, hightails it out of

there? He couldn't wait? The climax over and you not even there to see it? The master stirring, his bloodshot eyes blinking up at you? Oblivious to your slyness, your subtleties, your philosophical grasp of your task? Yes? What? That's it? Not worth a damn? The night's over?

Hotel Ortolan

The maid, who lives in the attic room above me, can barely make it down the stairs any longer. She has been in my service for twenty years, so I can hardly dismiss her. But all night I hear the creak of her bedsprings as she tosses about, unable to sleep, the room is too small, her back bent from stooping. Her little mouse feet scutter about the floor nervously. She does not know where to go. I can call on her to do nothing. I imagine her growing younger in sleep, growing younger, until one day footsteps are heard on the attic stairs, and a small child enters my room and draws the curtain.

Some days are longer than others. I came home late from the office, my fingers blackened from thumbing carbon paper. The corridors were poorly lit, and I found my way slowly to my door. I managed to insert my key, and, after some effort, the lock reluctantly clicked. I let my briefcase fall from my hand and was about to take off my hat when I noticed a man sitting at the desk in the corner. "But isn't this my room?" I asked. He turned his body

toward me, and I saw that instead of a head he had a clock which, because of its weight, tilted down into his hands. "I beg your pardon," I said and stepped back into the hall.

Little mysteries every day in the building: a man comes home and finds his water basin filled with roses; a woman a rose in the mouth of her baby.

Who will answer the phone for us? We have no switchboard, and the old retiree who sits in the overstuffed maroon chair beside the phone booth in the main hall speaks no language any of us know. We are left to depend on those who live on the first floor to answer the phone, but these people are all crippled or deaf or too old to be roused from their afternoon dreams. Nor can we imagine them running up the stairs to tell us there is a call, we must hurry, the person on the other end said it was urgent, he could not be kept waiting, but when we arrive no one is there; we press the phone to our ears and hear only distant static like paper being crumpled, and the sound of footsteps on marble.

In each of our boxes today were copies of the following type-script:

"An odd, most physical dream in this hotel room; one about my dead mother who in the dream is not dead, has never died. We were in a department store, the women's clothing section, and she was trying on new clothes. I was glad she was buying new clothes, I knew she deserved to have them, they would make her happy, she wanted to look pretty. The blouse was cream-colored and silky and had a lace pattern down the front. The skirt was a dark blue, the color of the sky at late twilight. She stood before me smiling, and I told her the clothes were lovely, and she smiled,

she was pleased, but then I thought, Why is she alive, I thought my mother was dead, and I realized that this was how my mother looked the year before her death, her body aged, skin puffy from her kidney diseases, her hair stiffened by illness, her eyes glazed. And beside her was a mannequin without a head whose torso was the same thickness as my mother's and who wore the same cream-colored blouse, the same blue skirt.—Then we were in a car, my mother was driving, the car was a model made two years after she had died. When I saw this, my mind seemed to be wrenched, pulled about, the knowledge of a displacement in time was nauseating. That's right, my mother said, keeping her eyes on the road. I am not dead, I cannot die because I was given Enox. No one can die. Everyone has had Enox but you. I understood Enox to be a process of some kind, perhaps a drug or a machine, that had caused everyone to become immortal, but I was afraid and disgusted by the thought of it. Only I was real. Then suddenly I felt something clutching and tearing into my side, like metal fingers, gripping inside me, the thing that would make me live forever. I tried to twist away, but the thing held, continued to tear away at my ribs, and I moaned and turned over against the wall, and awoke terrified from this nightmare.”

There is a staircase at the end of the hall that leads nowhere, at least I can't imagine it leading anywhere. No lights illuminate it at night, and during the day all I can see are shafts of dust-filled light criss-crossing some one hundred feet above, though I know the building well enough to know it has no windows in this region. Its banisters are smooth, the color of polished bone, and exude always the smell of floor wax, as though each day someone rubbed a rich paste deep into the wood. Etched into the rails are lines of squiggles like those a child might draw, yet there is a

repetition of figures that makes one think some meaning resides in them, but what that meaning is no one knows, the lines are indecipherable to any of us here. It is possible, some of us speculate, that the staircase was built long before the building, that it was part of another building, perhaps the original one on this site, and the contractor decided, for whatever reason, perhaps purely an aesthetic one, to build around it. But one cannot say it is either beautiful or functional. It is just a staircase in an out-of-the-way place that leads nowhere. We do not have to think about it or walk around it. So why then do I often find a handful of tenants gathered at the foot of these stairs, unwilling to climb up them though they look solid enough, mumbling quietly to themselves and staring up as if into a telescope?

I am only a little girl who lives in this hotel, I like to play in the dark beneath the stairs, but I am also a very special little girl for I have no arms. I have only hands, somewhat malformed ones stuck to my shoulders, not at all unlike flippers. The other children think I look like a seal, and I, too, like seals. I like the way they swim underwater, like a drop of water themselves, but alive, one with their element, whereas I am often alone under the stairs where it is filled with dust and the yellow magazines left by the tenants. I stack the magazines around me, make a castle with turrets and spy holes. I crawl about on my knees, my little hands waving uselessly in the air. I fling my hair out of my face with the motions of a horse. Sometimes I find a mousehole, but I am too large to crawl in. I put my face to the hole and look into the darkness hoping to see the glint off eyes staring back at me.

Why do we live here? Where are the maids? Who is the manager? To whom do we pay our bill? Why does it rain, per-

petually rain on the third and only on the third floor? Should we breathe this air? Will our daughters be brought up properly here? Have you signed the guest book? Has anyone ever seen the registry? The lobby? Bright birds fly into our windows at night. I no longer know how long I have lived here. How long have you lived here? Do you sleep well at night? I have seen sleepwalkers wandering the halls, holding empty cups in their outstretched hands. Who is it? In whose room are marches always being played? In whose room are there flowers? Are you warm enough at night? Does anyone know we are here? Are you truly pleased? Why is the curtain torn? Who is lost? Perhaps the days are wrong. Is your neighbor well? How did we come to be here? Is he in his room? Perhaps he is not in his room. Did you expect him to be in his room? Who is it? What do you want? Alone? Where are you off to? Do those bells in your hands have tongues?

It was early in the morning, the walls of my room had come closer together during the night, I had to get out. I slipped on my bathrobe and went to the courtyard. In the center was a fountain green with algae in which spotted Chinese goldfish swam lazily around. The statue of a child holding a ball in her upraised hand rose from the fountain, her face ravaged by corrosion. No sounds this early in the morning, only the smell of damp and mold. I sat on the cold, wrought-iron bench off to one side and looked up into the little cloud-wracked square of sky. What light could penetrate those clouds? What light would cause the locomotive rusting under the eaves on the other side of the courtyard to come alive, the locomotive that now was filled with the bones of birds? But it wasn't a locomotive after all, the mist had deceived me, there was just a stack of lumber, from which there now rose three women wearing only skirts, their breasts as pale as the moon. They

walked with their backs turned to me through the single-hinged gate that led into the kitchen, where already I could smell the coffee I would soon be drinking.

Is it that nothing changes here, or that everything does?

In the room next to mine live angels. Sometimes when I pass their room during the day their door is partially open and I step in. They hang from the ceiling, one in each corner, their dark wings enfolding them like the wings of bats. Always one opens its eyes, which are as gray as the sea, and I politely ask if there is anything I can do for them, but the angel only shudders inside its wings and closes its eyes. I do not stay long, the smell of the room, like that of dead birds, is too strong. I have never seen them in the halls or outside the building. But often at night I hear them stirring about, hear their wings thump against my wall, and their soft moans to one another, like those of people making love.

Some of the tenants came and asked me to write a petition for them. They crowded into my room, mostly women, but also a few men who shuffled about in the back with their hats still on, and some children who clung to their mothers' skirts and stared at me with curiosity, or perhaps with fear. I have been ill lately, I am an old man, and I was propped up in my bed still in my nightshirt when they came to me this morning. "And what is this petition about?" I asked. "A petition," they repeated. "We need you to write a petition for us." "To whom are you petitioning?" This, too, they could not answer. They only looked at me beseechingly and demanded again I write for them. "But I am an old man," I said. "I haven't been off my floor in years. I am lame. I seldom leave my room. I know almost nothing. Why have you come to

me?" They pressed closer to me; the stale odor of their sweat suffused the room. "The books," one of them said, and the others nodded to the small stack of books I have beside my bed. "Ah," I said, "yes, the books, but they are as old as I or older, most of them unread or else forgotten, they will be of little use." The children were tugging now at the sheet, I could hear it tearing. I slapped without effect their hands. "All right," I said. "I will do it. But you must give me time to compose it, I will need much time." The women seemed relieved by my answer, as if by my agreeing to write their petition their problems were solved. The men in the back took off their hats and bowed respectfully to me. Then they left my room. But now I must write the petition and I don't know what it will say. How can I help them? My words cannot solve the problems they are having; they are wrong to put their faith in me. I am an old man. How can I help them? I have nothing to say.

One day you enter at a side entrance you did not know existed, but you walked back a different way. You had been with a friend and you lost track of the time and your way. But coming back you find this entrance with a small fanlight and two concrete steps, as if it had been waiting for you. You walk up the steps, push the door which swings open easily and enter. The corridor is dark, lit only by the last rays of afternoon light that fall through the jalousie behind you. You do not recognize this part of the building; it must be somewhere in the back. Old posters, whose paper has faded so much their images (of a bullring empty except for the matador's hat, of a woman tied to a chair in a hotel room, of sand dunes) seem painted into the wall, line the corridor, but you do not examine them (posters for movies? for travel?). You are later than usual. You want to find your room, lie down on

your bed for half an hour before your evening begins. But this corridor is very long, when you look back you no longer can see the door through which you entered. Perhaps the corridor angles away imperceptibly, or perhaps you turned into a new one but it was too dark for you to notice. A light appears in the distance, a small singular light with a bluish cast. You walk toward it. It will lead you into the center of the building, you think, then you can find your bearings and go to your room. But as you approach the light, you see that a small child is holding it. The light is a single candle in a candelabra the child holds above its head, and the child is a girl, she wears tattered clothing, her skirt is the color of a cloth sack, her t-shirt is covered with dirt where she has wiped her hands. She smiles up at you, and her eyes are happy. You want to take her into your arms, but instead you take her hand which is cold. You feel nauseated, you want to pull your hand away but she won't let you. Why do you feel so weak? She's only a child. Her yellow hair brushes against your arm, you lean against the wall, tell her you want to rest a minute before she takes you to your room. The child releases your hand. She stares up at you and says she was not told to take you to your room. But where then were you leading me? Down the corridor, she says, and then she walks away. You're too tired to follow. The child vanishes into the darkness. You hear a door close and you move in the direction of the sound until you come to the door which is made of metal and has a metal handle. You push the handle down and walk into the room, but it is not a room; it is a small closet and at the bottom of the closet are three crawlspaces. You bend down and stare into the center crawlspace. You cannot see where it ends, so you get down on your hands and knees and crawl into it, hoping that it will lead into a region you know. You want desperately to be in your room. There was something important you

had to do tonight. Now you don't remember what it was, just that it must be done tonight. But you can't find your room, and the crawlspace is narrowing, goes downward, the walls soft as if made of cotton. You think you could sleep here, but would there be enough air? You are not tired, but suddenly you don't want to go any farther. You only want to remain still, to feel your knees against the floor, to feel your heart pumping blood through your body. You don't want to move, no urgency now, no need to continue on, no need to think, just to breathe and be here, and for a moment you stop. Then you hear a voice in the stillness, a voice that says, Come along now. You don't know where the voice comes from (inside your head?), but you smile, and continue downward, certain that the passage will soon end, or that other voices will urge you forward, that soon you will be in your room where there is something you must do you can't seem to remember, and this evening's journey will be like a dream, and like a dream soon forgotten.

It was early evening when I was shown to my room by an old man in a chalk-stained coat who said nothing to me and refused my tip. I closed the door behind me and laid my briefcase, the only luggage I had, on the bed. The room was painted a warm yellow, and I did not see the usual cheap landscape prints on the wall. Instead there were four large letters painted black on a gray background in ornate frames. The letters were N, S, E, and W, and were placed on the walls that coincided with their direction. I wanted to write a postcard, I wanted to tell someone I was here, and I opened the desk drawer where hotels keep their stationery. I expected the card to have a picture of the hotel on it, but instead it showed a curious scene. A young child in a nightshirt was walking up a staircase that led to a circle of bright light. His hair was

golden and his outstretched arms were covered with white birds. At the bottom of the card, where the stairs began, was the name Hotel Ortolan.

A man stands at his window. It is late evening. Behind him his bed is turned down for the night, but he is not sleepy. Across the way are the windows of another hotel. A few floors above him, he can see a young woman standing at her window. She is not looking at him. Her gaze is directed at a point well above him. What is she looking at? She does not move. Her face shows no expression. She only stares without ceasing at something he can not see.

Jorinda and Joringel

... he shot through the white thread that held her feet. What? Another story, but the same motif. Birds? Among other things. I'm not sure I can sustain this pulling. Not for you to decide. So what are we then? Ghosts appearing before the world spirit? Brother and sister? Lovers? Whatever befits the spirits. How long have they been planning this one? Six years? Sixty? Longer? Longer. He informed the sage that he could overlook everything else but the mysterious influences of a malign planet. Of course. I remember a tree in all its tree-ness, roots bulging from the ground. You would. Recently I've felt a chill coming over me. Like? Like an electronic wind over the grids. Could be that the spirits do not wear the malice of the once-living body. Tell that to the witch. Any other tests to take, tasks to perform? About two thousand, I'd say, after this one. You saw a golden casket hanging from a white thread? No, no, that was before, and what we must always do is move the future into the past. So. Yes. He opened the casket and twelve birds, one the soul of me, another of you, and all the birds died, and before we died we slew

a thousand Tartars. My favorite part. Sometimes it's said that the swan-soul was not in her. We slept as long as we could, me and my fellow bird sisters, then were made to sing, to sing, but how could the witch have stood our mad cacophony? I remember a dream, something about a flower and rooms and rooms of lovely young girls. Well, that was essentially it for you, but what of my days and nights in that infernal tower? Take it easy. The evening stole away, fled over mountains and fields. And came to? I don't remember, can't recall, a sack, something about a sack. Dream life. Dream time. As we always knew, did we not? A matter so intricate. The dwarf daughters from the cities. The priests shepherding them into their robes. All that. So we came to the forest. Yes. Yes. Always. We came to the forest, but what then, and always the same, we came to a forest, and what then. Things happened. A pool. A golden key. A strange song. Language. That's what happened. And the loss of it. Sing sorrow. Sing sorrow. And gone. Well I fell into a deep swoon and when I awoke I was in a cage and a one-legged man was bent over me fingering my feathers. We can retain whatever it is we want to retain, or we can lie. So the queen took the gold locket and flung it into the sea, and the young child screamed, My soul, my soul. We all live through it, or not. Sometimes, though, we capered, the others and I. And the flower was a pearl. Haven't you got over that yet? I don't know whether it's me doing this remembering or just the remembering. I know what you mean. Well, yes, some did bang their heads against the cages and die. You think I should have joined them? I thought, Well, sure this is strange, but stranger things than this, you know, and I cared about you so much. I had hope, at least in some of the stories, that you would save me. I'm not sure if I appreciate that responsibility now. Now? Now? I'm not talking about now, I'm talking about then, I'm always talking

about then. Don't you know that? That and other things. Like? Like that the old witch could have possessed her own opposite, was both death- and life-giver. Hadn't thought of that. The consequences of youth. Can't be said any longer. Still, it's nice to know, though, that the spirit is transferable. To what, to what, you idiot. Haven't you learned anything from all this? To what is what matters. Not what can be, but what is. I was a bird. I am a voice. I cannot be whatever it was I was before. Well, I never asked to be a higher expression of the self either, I was quite satisfied to be an average youth. Especially since your betrothed was the fairest? Yes, yes. I searched and searched until the ninth day and the sun lipped over the mountain and I found the blood-red flower. I thank you for that. It comes back sometimes, I don't know why. And the pearl? Yes, there was a pearl inside the flower, I remember that. And now? Something about a bald-headed man with a cane, something grotesque on the handle. And she? As beautiful as ever. Well, I still feel a chill. It's the grids. Day and night I travelled over them. Yes, yes. The strange village. And when the moon shone on the cages, what was to become of me? I always thought we would encounter a helpful animal. Sister, sister, throw him off. The ones who suck marrow from the bones of witches. We were lost? Yes, yes. Then we were found again. Always, until now. And now? A little more and it's over. Well, it's a strange story any way you look at it. Tell it again. There was a pond in my father's garden, and in the pond was the world's heaviest stone . . .

Quantum Surge in O Central

Dots, mostly, you know, is what I move around. (You can sit right over there. That's fine.) Been moving them about in these rooms a long time. How long? Longer than I can remember. Shove this negative charge into that corner and that proton into this corner and these mesons onto that grid; knock this electron out of its line and that quark out of its uniformity and this positron out of its mind—then hustle them all into my dot bag (DB-395s—standard issue) and pack them away in the Waiting Room until that time when their waiting's over.

Well, it's a living of sorts, a life. I can't deny it. Some years I'm especially fond of putting the white dots on a black background and other years black dots on a white background. Some years I'm deep into foregrounding, other years, into mid-grounding. Gray I don't like, threw a tantrum the first time they gave me gray to work with—and suffered for it. Had to work the gray dots for four decades without a vacation or break of any kind.

It's all, as Abell said, highly mass-dependent work. Abell was my mentor. What hands! Amazing grace leapt like mesons from

his fingertips. His moves, I confess, I do not have, but still he taught me a lot. Somewhere I figure there are students that transcend their teachers, otherwise the whole shebang would just get worse and worse until there was nothing but an unformed glob out there. But me—I can't hold a candle to Abell.

Remember the Nebulosity in Monoceros? That was his, as was the Way In and Track Segments and (my favorite) Quasi-Stellar Sources of the Unresolved. Abell had it all. He could dream a collision one day and the next condense a solar mass to its observational data in a way you'd never expect, and suddenly you'd wake up to a field of pre-main-sequences on a time scale unheard of. While I was still fluttering around open clusters embedded in gas clouds (eggs in a warm nest), Abell was out there on the edges scaffolding main sequences on demand.

Who could've imagined his end? One moment he was showing a bevy of new students how best to maintain the central pressures and temperature, and the next instant, matter degenerated so fast it compacted him and the astonished recruits into a white dwarf.

Often, when I've stabilized a few zones (if only for respite, stabilization is not my or your job), I've wandered these rooms wondering what happened that day. Had a student stumbled when he should've flown, stuttered when he should've sung? Was it Abell's mistake, and if so what could have caused it? Was it age that made him fumble? Was he showing off to the kids and waited a milli-second too late to ignite the release? Or was it something else, that something that's more like nothing that I, too, have felt, that whatever-it-is which makes you want to chuck the whole tray of wax into the fire or space or emptiness and you and all else with it? Quantum surge in O Central, the inspectors said, but I'm not sure—I have doubts, memories, disturbing dreams.

During the early days on the job, I encountered once a field of T Tauri variables where there should've been supergiants dripping irregular brightness on the hydrogen limbs. How had they gotten here, these T Tauri—and even a few hot subdwarfs? There was nothing to be done except get out as fast as I could. I'm no expert, I admit, on the variables, especially those in the central regions, but I know hydrogen from helium, and I know that whoever had composed the periodicity here had either rushed the job or deliberately overrode the diagram. So I mailed Main Frame: Who's been tinkering last in O Central? Abell, she replied. No, I thought. Probably only one of his novices who couldn't tell an eruptive from an eclipsing variable.

But the truth is, of course, I didn't want to consider that Abell might have screwed up. How could he? I lay in bed layering maxima until memory itself turned to dream and dream to vision, until eruptives eclipsed eruptives and all kinds of dwellings and dwellers—flash spectra, ions, chromospheric fire lines—littered the charts of my day and night life. Emissions lifted the corona of my dot bag, spilled low level extensions into memory's photosphere: Abell at the blackboard, his arm thrust in up to his elbow, his eyes as lost as rain at sea; Abell and I sharing a job placing transparent gas shells in a catacomb of continuous radiation and metastables, but his heart (I could see it in the dip of his eyelids and emission lines) not in it. Something was missing in the matter that made Abell Abell, something forgotten, eaten up, lost.

There've been days, I don't mind telling you, during sunspot maxima, when I've shifted ions at an incredible rate (100 spots a second) and left on the finished field tubular poles of a thousand gauss just for the fun of it. But they're rare, rare. Vacancy is my mantra these days, vacancy, vacancy—Abell taught me that—but the sign begins to revolve on its axis deflecting all my conscious

light, no matter the material I toss into it, and for days I drift avoiding my job, evading memories, my eyes a sea of solar granulation and despair. Usually these plagues occur during days of higher-than-average magnetic fields, neutralizing the flocculi, moments when I'm as inactive as a quiet sun, but lately I don't know when they might come on me.

It doesn't matter what I'm doing—translating the spectral into actual pulsations, re-radiating a periodic surface, or just lying about in the back room with nothing to do but calculate magnitude changes, when, electrons prickling my scalp, suddenly I'm floating there at the center of the minimum, while the cepheid, in all its tiny amplitude, pulsates before me. Beep, it says. Beep, beep. But it doesn't mean anything to me. A message? A warning? A friendly greeting? No, it's just a cepheid, just something I shape and collapse and monitor, construct and deconstruct, and I could care less about whether it's a cepheid or a RR Lyrae.

Once, in O Central, I dreamed E. led me by the hand into a cluster and laid me down in the dust and, over the body at her feet, wept; then she was gone and Abell was there in her stead admonishing me for the shoddiness of my report on W Virginis and a host of hypotheticals and asked me why I couldn't imagine a death for myself worthy of my vocation, and I wanted to answer him, but instead slipped in a free fall down rivers of candescent light, and there was nothing I could tell him, nothing I could do to stay my fall.

But what a master he was, not like the faculty you have today, all of us divided and subdivided and subsubsubdivided into subchambers like these. Yes, true distances are accessible and corrections must be applied, but try to correct a cepheid on your own, like Abell could, and you'll find yourself up for charges at best, but more likely you'll be a bundle of charged magnitudes adrift

and flickering out. Abell could hold and turn and, with a single glance, realign a luminosity to the fifteenth or sixteenth apparent. What happened that day in O Central?

Sometimes I imagine the event, construct scenarios of how it must have been, attempt to relive it. Abell guides them along the right course of the modification of absolute magnitudes, but their eyes glaze. They know he no longer means it. And Abell thinking, They could never follow me into the densities I know must come, yes, now perhaps take them into the eruptives where the outer moment ejects in the form of a shell, an ear, an ever-expanding mass. Synchrotron. Polarized light. And then he turns, his hands heaped with silicon and chromium, smiles for a moment at what he is about to do (why the smile?), and the whole zone collapses.

Is that how it was or am I missing something essential? Quantum surge. O Central.

That's enough for today. Tomorrow you'll be issued your DB-395s.

There is no *and so on* . . .

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