

Beginners, or The First Voyage of Discovery

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Abstract

Beginners, or The First Voyage of Discovery

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Set in the swells of history, *Beginners* tells the story of Ellipsis, three dots with nothing to do. A visit from The Universe prompts Ellipsis to return to work on her island. She needs men—and God is sent to help. What follows is the parody of a grand project where the likes of Christopher Columbus, James Cook, and Ferdinand Magellan find themselves on the same ship, fighting for the command of their first voyage of discovery and the imagined promise of their myriad destinations. Meanwhile, the contestants on a TV show wait patiently for love . . .

“They change their sky, not their mind, those who cross the sea.”
- Horace

I

Ellipsis, lying on the beach, languid.

...

The main thing is, she is bored. Terribly bored. A self-diagnosed boredom, worse than rain. And how it rains on her island! Would it ever stop? Slump, slump. This is how she moves—in slumps. Victim of her own circumference. She would run if she could, but she slumps. Sometimes she plops. Plops along the shore, the vapid shore, pausing here and there, gazing at the horizon, hoping for—what. Governments? Institutions? Young men? A mirror? These are the dreams of history. For that is what she is—History. Ellipsis of History. Proud of her spheres. Her rich, soft orbs. Oh, they were the kind of orbs that gave nothing away. But if you looked closely, perhaps when the light was just right, and when there was a break in the rain, and with the assistance of a microscope, you could see every pause in time. Was that the birth of the Messiah in the highlands of her first dot? Were those the walls of Constantinople falling in her second? Could that be James Chadwick discovering the neutron at the end of her third?

Yes. She had it all—and yet.

.
. .
.

Bored. So terribly, terribly bored.

A Great Discovery

A small ship on the Atlantic, heading south at a lazy pace. Christopher Columbus, looking west, discovers he is naked.

“Balls,” he says, scratching them.

He runs the length of the ship, rallying the men, saying things like, “Board meeting, now.”

Naked men hurry down the ratlines. Down the masts. Up out of the hold like ants. “Balls,” they say to the captain as he runs. “Balls,” he says as he runs. He is firm. He salutes.

Francis Drake, tickling his mustache under a mast, has no time for salutations. He is a man of actions. He puts his foot out and Columbus falls. Columbus lands on a letter to the Queen of England, which Drake is writing:

“Dear Elizabeth,” reads Columbus, spredeagled, solemn. “Are you alive? I have made a discovery, moral in nature: We must be kind to our Spanish cousins.”

Drake blushes under his beard. He lowers his eyes. He spots his cog, his little English . . . “God!” he says. “I’m naked.” Columbus, feigning the need to keep reading the letter, keeps reading the letter:

“My queen, I’m doing my best” . . . “blah blah” . . . “Haven’t touched my sword” . . . “blah” . . . “Not once, my queen” . . . “blah blah blah” . . . “Need gold.”

Bad prose, thinks Columbus, scrunching the letter. Lying down, he remembers his discovery, feels it on the wood as Drake sees his—

“Good sir,” says Columbus, ascending. “No more romance, and no more chivalry. Our days of dilly-dallying are behind us. We have a situation on our hands, somewhat historical.”

Up, up. Running. He runs the length of the ship, yelling at the trustees: “To the helm!” Below deck he finds Marco Polo on a barrel of wine, not hurrying, clutching a wad of paper bills.

“You must be the treasurer,” says Columbus, leaning in to sniff the bills, which smell like silk. “Something’s come up. You’re needed.”

“Actually, I’m a writer.”

“What have you written?”

“Nothing *yet*,” says Marco Polo, abashed. “I’m unpublished. But I’m going to chronicle the Alchemical Khan.”

“Haven’t heard of him.”

“You haven’t heard of the Alchemical Khan?”

“One of those paper-pushers, isn’t he?”

“The paper is a stand-in for gold. High tech. What he calls currency. You *have* heard of him.”

“Nonsense travels.”

“Think of it as manure.”

Columbus, not typically fearful, uncertain, or in doubt, is momentarily all of those things: “Manure,” he says, licking his lips, which had chapped. “But what’s wrong with a few gold *groats*?”

“The future,” says Polo, “is paper.”

The men look at each other. A moment of understanding. Something deep and reverent. But they are interrupted. Snorts. They look for the sound, without success.

“That’s very advanced,” says Columbus, eyeing the paper in Polo’s hands. He remembers his discovery. “Do come to the meeting.”

Yes, yes, he’ll be there, says Polo. He is pro-meetings. He puts his money in his pocket. Only he doesn’t have pockets. He’s naked. He sees the Khan between his legs.

“The alchemy of it all!” he cries, stuffing his money in an empty barrel of wine. He is good at thinking on his feet.

Meanwhile Columbus runs. He’s running the length of the ship, he’s rallying the men. He’s saying things like, “Balls.” He is the captain. This is his job.

II

The island. A little later on the first day.

Ellipsis, lying in her bungalow above the beach, laughing at The Universe. When she laughs, she cackles. Then she clucks. Short, low clucks, like trees falling, or footsteps in the Tower of London. Perhaps her laughter is more like a series of thuds, or a knocking at the door, late at night, when the foxes are burying shoes in the garden. Regardless, she is laughing at The Universe, The Universe being unusually funny on this occasion. Outside, it was raining.

THE UNIVERSE We need another sun.

... (laughing).

THE UNIVERSE Planet PSO J318.5-22 is very lonely.

... Has she considered dancing?

THE UNIVERSE She's dancing in the dark. She's floating.

... She must be cold.

THE UNIVERSE She's very cold.

... But young, I assume.

THE UNIVERSE Only 12 million years.

... I don't have it in me to make another sun.

THE UNIVERSE But you're bored. Terribly bored.

... It's true. I have never been so bored.

THE UNIVERSE We are sending help.

... An engineer, I hope. Or a physicist.

THE UNIVERSE Is God okay?

... (listless). I need men, not ideas.

THE UNIVERSE God will procure. He always procures.

... Jupiter did not procure.

THE UNIVERSE (apologetic). Jupiter was grotesque. God is different. He's ...

... He's what.

THE UNIVERSE French.

... And?

THE UNIVERSE Homeless. Desperate for friends.

... Can He play the gong?

The Universe says of course God can play the gong.

LOVE ISLAND: SEASON 1, EPISODE 1

THE LAUNCH * FULL TRANSCRIPT *

We meet 6 new islanders who have to couple up for the first time.

VOICE OVER

Brace yourself, America.

Get ready for love, lust, and some very tiny swimsuits.

[♪ Baby ... My heart is full of love ♪]

Welcome to "Love Island" and an unforgettable summer of love here on St. Helena.

This is your captain speaking.

Please prepare the cabin for landing on "Love Island."

Over the next four weeks, only the sexiest sexy singles will get into this tropical haven.

They've packed more abs than shirts and are all here with one goal—to find love.

And you're in control.

Voting on all sorts of decisions that impact the show in real-time.

How modern.

[♪ Baby ♪]

Ultimately you'll decide which couple wins \$100,000.

♪ ♪

Chaperoning our lovebirds is the elegant, sophisticated and
classy ARIELLE. Are you ready?

ARIELLE

I'm so ready for love.

On The Source Of Snorts

It was bearable inside the wine barrel. Vasco Núñez de Balboa, tall and handsome, was enjoying a siesta. If he kept his knees bent and his arms folded, he could nod off. Sometimes he even dreamed.

In a dream he is walking toward a vast, unknown ocean, something he will claim for Spain. Water appears on the horizon and he wades into the waves, sword in one hand, the Virgin Mary in the other. The Virgin Mary is quite heavy, but Balboa is Spanish. With courage, he says, “Spain,” and Mary removes her bra.

Sometimes Balboa dreams of creditors. Income tax, and the backwardness of tolls in general, disturb his sleep. In an unsettling dream he sees the king on a surfboard. But instead of saying things like, “Bitchin waves, bro,” the king is saying things like, “You’re required to pay an annual fee.” Balboa always wonders why the king isn’t doing something else, like expanding the kingdom of Christ.

Balboa wakes up.

Someone is sitting on his barrel, covering the air holes with their legs. He frets, not because the legs smell like pollen, but because the owner of the legs is talking about, of all things, paper.

A khan, or a calm, or a barn.

My God, thinks Balboa. How long can this go on? Minutes pass. It is dark inside the barrel. Smell of wine and, what is it—he sniffs—dog?

He falls asleep. He snorts. He dreams. There’s the king, surfing—

A tickle. Paper in the air holes. Balboa has had enough. He cannot plunder, or find an ocean, without peace. He pushes the lid off the barrel and emerges in the hold, ready to pounce. He is alone.

Except for—a goat. There, under a neighboring hammock, a goat observes him dully. He feels the animal's gaze below his belt. He looks down. He is naked.

Above him, on the ship's deck, he hears talk of balls.

III

Later on the first day.

God comes to on the shore. His brown suit is soaking wet. Salt, a little soapy, in his nose and eyes. Birds. Bottles. Beached jellyfish, blue and alien, emanate from his body.

He remembers boarding an English ship. This is a vague memory, difficult to trust, and he wonders if it wasn't a Russian ship. Or maybe a German ship. He remembers making a deal with the captain, or trying to make a deal, something involving the sun.

Then, nothing.

Had he sworn at the captain, or accidentally killed his children? He hopes not.

"I've heard of you."

God sits up and finds a figure beside him. Three of them. Impossible to describe, other than to name, Ellipsis. She is horizontal and alluring. With the manners of a monarch he introduces himself:

"Some people call me a savior. A tyrant. The destroyer of peace. I suffer from terrible misconceptions and, recently, stomach pains."

"Troubling," she says.

She greets him in style, hovering a little way from his body, hinting at what is to come. God asks a few logical questions, like, *Where am I?*

"Usually soldiers and sailors call at my island." Ellipsis moves closer. "This is a treat," she says.

"And what am I?" says God.

"You're . . ."

“An artist?”

“No . . .”

“A fugitive?”

“You are,” she says, “Head of Procurement.”

“That’s reassuring,” says God, who has a theory about such things.
“What do you need?”

“Men.”

She takes him to her bungalow for lunch, which happens to be a rack of ram.

IV

After lunch. The beach. A gentle breeze.

Ellipsis brings God a gong. At first, He mistakes it for a rock.

GOD I'm trying to relax.

... Think of it as a hobby.

GOD What about surfing, or gardening? Roses, apple trees.
Something for Saturdays.

... I need men.

GOD There are other ways.

*She retrieves a mallet from her inner dot and strikes the gong.
Eons, bee-like, fill their ears and move the waves.*

A passage of time.

... Take your hands out of your pockets.

GOD I'm not optimistic.

*God takes the mallet and strikes the gong on the nipple. It makes a
terrible roar and they cover their ears.*

... Odd. Hit it again.

God hits it again.

... You'll get the hang of it.

*Heavy and lump with lunch, God hits the gong again and again.
Roars give way to wisdom. He thinks of triumph. France. The
victories of his youth. Elli slips away. Around him, the ocean.*

A New Course Is Shaped

The Atlantic, further south, somewhere off the African west coast.

The trustees gather round the helm. A hot wind fills the sails and tickles the burdens between their legs, not displeasingly. On the agenda: nudity.

“Captains,” says Columbus, “look around you.” He is stern.

Captain Vasco da Gama, naked, looks east. Captain John Cabot, naked, looks north. Captain Francis Drake, naked, looks south. Looking west is Ferdinand Magellan, naked, Captain. Ninety odd captains do the same.

“Fools,” says Columbus.

White-haired and stately he points at them, vaguely, and at their cogs, vaguely. The men gasp as they come to terms. They murmur. They cover their bits. The wind, filling the sails, is hot. It is prosperous.

“Captains, Gentlemen, Sirs: we are in dire straits.”

Magellan faints. This pleases some of the trustees, like Vasco da Gama, who laughs like a king, perhaps of Portugal. They wait for Columbus to go on.

Going on, Columbus: “We can’t go on,” he says, one hand over his cog, one on the helm. “Not like this.” The men notice his good posture.

“We are exposed,” comes a voice.

“In hot water,” comes another.

“Hungry for a sign,” comes another.

A sign appears. Captain Cabot, old and churchy, points to the ensign flapping above them, where Words are written. He puts on his glasses:

“It says,” he says, “Cover up before returning to work!” He licks his lips. “Christ!” he says. He jumps overboard with his purse. A splash. Sinking into the past. The men at the gunwales, gasping, expecting:

“Who was that?” asks Brendan the Navigator, another monk, Irish, and prone to questions. “And why isn’t he working?” Brendan believed in the spiritual necessity of work, even in the direst straits.

“A governor, I think,” says Abel Tasman.

“Leave him!” says Columbus, going on, commanding the company. “We mustn’t dilly dally. Urgency is the key.”

“He’s right,” comes a voice. “Think of the shareholders.”

Yes, thinks Columbus, thinking of the shareholders, and the shareholders’ lovers, and their lovers, and Beatrice—he thinks of Beatrice, too. Columbus suggests they find their Undies.

“Christian Undies, Sir?” says Captain Magellan, back on his feet, taking an interest in the company’s charitable objectives.

“Briefs, specifically,” says Columbus. “Only three days sail. Where there is a Great Khan with lots of, er, paper.”

“He’s right,” says Marco Polo, who takes the opportunity to read from his manuscript, elaborating on formative life events like buying salt. He reads for hours, omitting the parts about men who eat men, which are, he decides, uninspiring, and might not make the final cut.

Eventually:

“West!” cries Columbus. “To the sophisticated citizens of the Great Khan and the spicy ports of the Orient!”

“West!”

The men with their hands on deck. “To the Undies,” they chant. “To the Briefs!” A westward course is shaped. The wind is hot.

Soon, a mallet moves in front of the sun, and the men gawk. A terrible sound fills their ears. Very oppressive.

Earlier, A Franchise

Juan Ponce de León drinking a Bloody Mary above deck.

If asked, he would say the ship is heading north. Hadn't they left Puerto Rico that morning? He was the captain. He should know.

He is disgruntled and publicly old. Where were his clothes? The red feather in his cap? More pressing: Where was the franchise of youth? There was only so much a man could do with gold—like govern an island, or enslave it, and he had done both. But the things a man could do with young legs . . .

He orders another Bloody Mary. Around him, the trustees are working hard. They have their hands on deck. There's Leif Ericson with his hands on deck. There's Francis Drake with his hands on deck. There's Vasco da Gama. Except, who's this—a slacker:

“Captain,” says Xu Fu, “I know the way to the franchise of youth.”

“Which one,” says Juan. He has been tricked before. He will not be tricked again.

“The franchise of everlasting life, the one that you seek, what else?”

Hmm, thinks Juan. Not another trick, is it? He'll vet the man. Xu Fu, he says, tell me more. Xu Fu tells him more:

“I have orders from the emperor—”

“The emperor?”

Yes, says Xu Fu, the emperor.

“Go on.”

“—that immortality waits for us in the East.”

Juan Ponce de León scans the horizon for his Bloody Mary. Bloody hopeless, these men. Not too much to ask for a quick do of tomato juice, celery salt, lemon, lime, vodka, pepper, horseradish, Tabasco sauce, Worcestershire sauce, smoked paprika, and a bit of parsley, olive, lime, bacon, and half a celery stalk on top.

“There are three islands,” says Xu Fu, “where immortals live in temples of gold and silver and where all the animals are white and speak English.”

“How many animals?”

“For example: 10,000 pretty white horses.”

“Just to confirm, you said everlasting *life*, not perpetual *youth*?”

“Yes.”

“See, that’s the problem.” He sees his drink. “I need better knees. And a more vigorous, er, cog. I don’t want to just live forever. I need the seed of youth!”

Just then the Pilgrim Fathers arrive with his Bloody Mary. Not ones to eavesdrop casually, they had taken an interest in León’s lament:

“You like pimples, do you?” they say as one, chorus-like.

“And mood swings?”

“Hormones.”

“Slamming doors.”

“Profuse shrugging.”

“Eye rolling.”

“Brain development.”

“Alienation.”

“Nihilistic angst.”

“Incoherent mumbling about nihilistic angst.”

“Romance.”

“Alternative music.”

“Youth,” they continue as one, “is nothing but trouble.”

“We would know.”

They mention their kids.

“One day they’re reading the Bible.”

“The next they’re smoking.”

“Asking for money.”

“Selling their bodies.”

“Growing their hair.”

And so on.

“It’s not right.”

“It’s not.”

“What you need is a quiet place to pray.”

“Somewhere you can think for yourself.”

“Far from the Church of England, of course.”

Juan Ponce de León sighs a great, unfathomable sigh. He is used to being misunderstood. He takes the Pilgrims with a pinch of salt. *Love*, he thinks to himself. *Love!* If only they knew what it was like to love someone half their age, to wake day after day with the fear that she might find someone else, a young hunk, maybe, with a gallant cog.

He orders another Bloody Mary. Then, a commotion. Columbus, running around.

V

The second day, late in the afternoon.

God was playing the gong. He was dreadful. His music reeked of inexperience. Could this go on forever? God forbid!

GOD I need to get off this island.

He played for an hour, gazing at the waves, woozy of morning routine, sweating his brown suit, getting nothing but curses from the drones on guard above the beach. Distracted, hard, certain, He heard nothing but round.

He wept.

He raised the sea with his tears.

Ellipsis, watching him from the bungalow.

Dot dot dot, extending to the beach, smooth Ellipsis of History, master of the island and over-devoted.

... You are wasting away.

GOD I am water.

... Perhaps you would like another coffee.

She pours Him a cup, spillage.

GOD I have the nerves of a crocodile and the mind of a mosquito.

... "Hush yourself, noisy little man" (Sandburg).

GOD I am weak and I am strong.

... Come with me.

Brown suit off at once. They wade into the waves, God and . . ., and what they do is they make love. God weeps into the afternoon, playing His gong. Many clouds, curses, birdsong of curses.

Hush, hush.

Cook Wakes Up

Captain James Cook was the captain of a farm. Cabbages grew in concentric circles around him. A thousand cartons per acre, he thinks, or two thousand. Maybe three, if the yield is good. “Ye beauties,” he sighs.

Suddenly his cabbages are organizing, knocking on the door, there’s a yell, the voice gruff, alarming: “Sir, Columbus is taking the sails off the mast...” A pause, dark and tonic; inaudibles: Then: “...cutting them into *briefs!*”

Shrieks.

Cook wakes up to the bad breath of Ferdinand Magellan, who is leaning over him and shaking his shoulders.

Is that so, he thinks.

“What kind of briefs?” he says. He stretches.

“Fig leaves, sir. Pretty things. Gold trimmed.”

“God what. A ship needs sails!”

“It has to do with our, er, situation,” came Magellan. He doesn’t cover up. He has come to terms with his situation, the facility of it all.

“And what might that be?”

Cook discovers he is naked. His cog is bigger than Magellan’s. He blushes.

“This is perfectly normal,” he says. “I’m over 6 feet, striking, and English.”

“Besides the point, Sir. The sails. The sails!”

“Indeed!”

Cook runs above deck where he finds the men tugging sails from the mainmast. He saunters down the assembly line, inspecting operations, wondering if the men are being paid a good wage.

Captain Khashkhash is drawing patterns.

Captain Cabral is cutting fabric.

That must be Leif Ericson with pins and needles.

Though foul of mood, Cook is stirred by the craftsmanship of his captains: he has never seen such beautiful briefs.

“For our figures, Sir,” says Khashkhash, holding a large leaf over his parts.

“Out of respect for the King of the Undies,” says Leif Ericson, “a very decent king, according to comrade Marco, who says he’s the bee’s knees.”

Cook frets. The mainmast stands thin. The wind is hot. “Marco?” he says.

Columbus appears, finally decent. His leaf is rough round the edges, a regrettable but not insufferable source of chafing.

“What you see here, sailor,” he says to Cook, sensing Cook’s doubt, scratching his balls, “is an investment in discovery. We cannot go to the Undies ungirthed.”

“Ungirdled, Sir,” says Khashkhash, correcting him. “If that’s what you mean.”

“And so we are taking a small risk, sartorial in nature,” he continues.

“With my sails,” says Cook.

“*Our* sails, comrade.”

“And how will we get there?”

Columbus mentions something about God's will. As if summoned, Brendan the Navigator, a monk, appears. He, too, is naked.

"Don't fear," he says. "Our Company is in God's hands. This is His ship. May he use us to His will."

Cook tells Columbus the Undies are a myth.

Before he can go on, an almighty sound, a bit scratchy, fills the air. The wind picks up. Fig leaves fly. The men scramble. The ship, heading south, is no longer lazy. It rocks and sways against the spray. Above them, a mallet on the sun.

"Take in the sails!" says Khashkhash.

"Strike the royals!" says Cook.

"Batten the hatches!" says Columbus.

"God, help us!"

And so on.

VI

The second day, a little later in the afternoon.

God and . . . on the beach, after the act. God massaging her third dot, unwittingly defacing an Egyptian sphinx.

“Elli, please, Paris needs me.”

“What for?”

“Work, tax, expansion. Church, of course.”

“And war?”

“Which one?”

“I can see it in your eyes. That look. The first time I thought you needed to pee. Jupiter had the same look in his eyes when he needed the little boy’s room. You’re different.” She tickles his stomach. “Are you thirsty?”

“I’m cursed.”

“Or desperate.”

“The bathroom is a battlefield.”

“‘What comes in must go out’, Jupiter liked to say.”

“Precisely.”

“Well . . . ”

“Had you any sense of history, Elli-bear, you’d have cut to the chase and given me an ax, an adze, and enough wood to make a ship.”

“I *am* history.”

“I want to believe you.”

“The last ax went to Jupiter.”

“And?”

“That’s it.”

“There must be more.”

Elli, pointing to the gong. Oh, how she loved to point!

While Cook was Waking Up

The Pilgrim Fathers sunbathing on deck.

“This beats Leyden.”

“A fair and beautiful city.”

“But cold, so cold.”

“Gray.”

“Dull.”

“And hard work.”

“It is nice to relax.”

“Get away from those looms.”

“The guild.”

“War with Spain.”

“And beheadings.”

“Yes, the beheadings, and being burned at the stake.”

They want to enjoy the sun, but they feel a tingling in their toes.

“Feel that?”

“God.”

“Hope he’s merciful today.”

“Yesterday he was rough, not merciful at all.”

“What’s he saying?”

“Something down in the hold.”

“Wants us to check it out, I suppose.”

They go and investigate. They find a leak in the hull. Worms in the biscuits. A pregnant goat on a mat.

“Not again,” they say.

They decide to report the leak to the company.

“Leak in the hull! Leak in the hull!”

“Gather ye round,” they call out to the strangers around them.

“We might sink,” they chant.

They are overlooked, or unheard. A man is running up and down the ship, yelling obscenities, like “Balls!” He is commanding. “Briefs!” he yells.

“Nasty,” say the Pilgrim Fathers.

Columbus trips and falls into their prayer.

“Good sir,” they tell the man, who has the voice of a lion, “we think men should be judged by their beliefs, not their briefs. And besides,” they say, “the hull is full of holes.”

“You’re not interested in saving some sinners?” says Columbus.

“Urgent work,” say the Fathers. “But we are content.”

Columbus tells them to look at themselves. They look at themselves. They observe their cogs with definitive disinterest.

“Are you Catholic or Anglican, sir?” they say.

“Catholic.”

Unanimous shock.

“Well, no wonder.”

“Don’t think we’ll be participating in your little venture.”

“But I am committed,” says Columbus, “to free markets and minimal government interference. And I’m not voting for Muhammad.”

“Those days are behind us,” say the Fathers, “like Leyden.”

“We should be distinguished,” they say, “by our conversation, not our dress.”

“Our purity of mind, not our breeches.”

“There’s a contract floating around.”

On the grounds of this faith alone, the Fathers excuse themselves from production. They were, after all, on their way to propagate the gospel of God, whom they had never seen in panties.

VII

God, in His diary:

When I look at My hands, I don't think, Wow, beautiful. I don't think, Wow, what gifts. Once, a relative told Me I have long fingers, and, attuned to the pedigree of pianists with long fingers (she often mentioned Sergei Rachmaninov and Franz Liszt), she wondered if I might make a living at the piano, taking it for granted, perhaps, that I liked the piano. She was a sweet old woman, very kind, and observant. Other people have noticed My long fingers, too, and the reservoir of talents that such gifts grant access to, a reservoir that is not, as might be expected, a source of joy, but actually a constant source of worry. I can't tell you how many times people have come up to me, saying, Oh, what I would do to have hands like you! For example, when I was a student in college, I took a class on the Romantic poets, and one day a famous scholar came to our class. He read William Wordsworth. Every time he looked up from, for example, some "steep and lofty cliffs," or "the heavy and weary weight of this unintelligible world," I felt his gaze on my fingers. Later that day, I happened to see him in the mess hall, where suspicions often come to a head. I was reaching for some coleslaw in the salad bar when he tapped me on the shoulder, pointed at my fingers and said, "Lovely. Just lovely." It's true, I *do* have long fingers, perfect for smiting, but the problem is, my hands are often filled with *things*. I'm not sure if it's something I said a long time ago, some message of hope I left somewhere in the universe, but I am tormented by the task of holding. I wish it upon no one.

Also While Cook Was Waking Up

When Brendan the Navigator wakes up in a hammock below deck, not wearing the cloak he had gone to bed in, and surrounded by naked monks he had never seen in Ireland, he is not necessarily worried. He thinks, This is probably still God's will.

He had slept well. Perhaps he had slept too well. But now he was awake and, as the monks went about checking their cogs, and counting their goats, and emerging from barrels, and fixing what needed to be fixed, he recalls what that nice angel had told him last week on his mountain above the Western Sea:

“Arise, O Brendan, for God has given you the Land of Promise, but it's a bit far away, on a lovely green island, only there's no map, just the all-teeming sea, and a few prosperous winds, so you'll have to put yourself in His hands, and pray a lot, if you want to get there soon.”

Well, thinks Brendan, thank God for that.

He arises.

He prays:

“Here I am, God. I have studied scripture. I even learned Latin. I built a few monasteries. Because of all that, I hear you're taking me to Paradise, the Paradise of Delights, which I've heard is a pretty nice place, free from all the evils of the earth, and where about 10,000 pretty white sheep roam free, and where there is plenty of land for another monastery. Firstly, thank you.”

There was more to say, but he hears a commotion above deck. Something about balls.

Bells

Captain Vasco da Gama, wearing a mighty fig leaf, tells us:

What I thoroughly dislike about Admiral Zheng He is he keeps his questions to himself. Every morning I wake up next to him and he looks like he's sleeping but I know he's lying there asking questions like, Where is Calicut?

I know where Calicut is.

It's easy.

And I wish he would ask me for input.

I have valuable skills to offer this venture. No one asks me anything, not the least Zheng He, who pretends to sleep instead of investing in the company. We share a hammock. He plays with my bells, my precious Portuguese bells, which I plan to trade with the good citizens of Mozambique, in exchange for knowledge.

We are close, Zheng He and I.

I ought to hear his questions.

Junk

How had he, Admiral Zheng He, who had helped the Prince of Yan become the Yongle Emperor, and served as the Director of Palace Servants for said Emperor, and even helped said Emperor build a nice big fleet of treasure ships—how had he come to be on such a small ugly barge, so square and squat, with only three masts, and so decidedly English (it reeked of coal), and manned by men without undies?

This was Admiral Zheng He's waking question.

Questions often found him in bed, much like sunlight, or the sound of birds alighting on the rigging above deck. Sometimes his questions were short and sweet like, *What did the emperor do with my balls?*

For he was a eunuch.

Or more metaphysical like, *Am I getting old?*

For he had reached the age of 35.

But today's question featured his junk, and his fleet of junks, including 27,000 sailors, which had, under his command, unquestionably, disappeared.

Where were the blank scrolls the Emperor had put in his possession?

He was going to Calicut, on the west coast of India, to buy rare wood for the Emperor. Maybe a bit of cardamom. And cinnamon. Ginger, too. He would even tax the locals.

For the Emperor liked taxes.

But where was his beautiful junk with nine masts? To command a ship with only three masts—it made him sick.

Realization

The trustees above deck, after the first strike of the sun.

“Our briefs are gone.”

The men cast their eyes over the storm-assaulted deck. Their operations, erased. It was too much for Christopher Columbus, who had thought he was onto something. His fig leaf, flapping in the wind.

“History,” says Leif Ericson, “is full of surprises.”

“She’s cruel,” say the Pilgrim Fathers.

“Perhaps,” says Brendan, “this is a sign.”

“Shut up,” says Columbus. “I have it on good authority”—he looks for Marco Polo—“that the Undies are real, that they are governed by the King of Kings, and that this King is not only impatient to trade, but lonely, and desperate for decent friends.”

“Christian friends, sir?” says Captain Khashkhash.

Captain Cook, fearless, pantless, pacing the deck:

“I am a man of my time,” he says, “which means I am not only mad about clarity, reason, independent thinking, freedom, the moral order of purposes, knowledge, and science, but also about maps,” he says.

Many of the men disappear.

“If you look here,” Cook says, pointing to the Americas on a map of the world, “what do you see?”

“Forgery,” says Columbus, putting it lightly. “Lies. Disgusting English deceit.”

“The Undies are *east*,” says Cook, “right here, next to Japan.” He points.

Columbus disapproves. He disappears.

“What you gentlemen have to wrap your heads around,” Cook says, addressing the brave, “is we have no need for loincloths.”

He tells them they are going to King George’s Island to observe the transit of Venus across the face of the sun, a much more interesting and intellectually nourishing endeavor.

“Never heard of it.”

“He means King Charles.”

“James.”

“Or John, perhaps,” says a newcomer, Captain Cão. “He must be talking about King John.”

“Gentlemen,” says Cook, “tell me: have you ever looked up at the sky after a long day, maybe a long day of hauling coal from Whitby to London, when there isn’t enough beer for the keelmen, and the ship’s master is asking about his wages, and the heavens are asking about the master’s wife, and you’ve just about had it with the whole thing, the whole dreadful thing, especially the government, who are raising taxes to feed the orphans, who are apparently sad, and so you’re looking up at the sky, and just when you think you’re going to curse the soot one more time, you think, *How far away is the sun?*”

“No.”

“No.”

More “No.”

“Funny,” says Admiral Zheng He. “That’s one of my morning questions, up there, recently, with *Where’s India?*”

“The answer waits at King George’s Island.”

“I might be interested,” says Juan Ponce de León, “in following you to a faraway land to witness an eclipse by the *moon*, but the trance of *Venus*—that’s all?”

“It sounds to me,” says Captain Abel Tasman, “like a cover up.”

“I assure you it’s not.”

“A cover up for a land grab, one of those cheeky English land grabs.”

“Our land grabs,” says Cook, “are actually quite practical, tactical, and incredibly well planned.”

“Here here,” says Francis Drake, applauding.

“I’m not sure if we would call our land grabs *land grabs*,” says Admiral Zheng He. “We tend to simply drop anchor somewhere and ask for money. But of course, a lot of planning goes into where we drop anchor. You can’t sail to India without the monsoon, or a pantry.”

“Let’s stay on topic: Venus.”

“For example,” continues Zheng He, “we turned one of our finest junks into a pantry because, at the end of the day, empires are like young men—always hungry, seldom satisfied, and disappointing on an empty stomach.”

“So we’re not looking for spice, or undies?”

“Are we not children of a more enlightened age?” says Cook.

He runs up to the poop, addressing the men from a higher place.

“Do we not hunger for knowledge, for insight into our place in the galaxy, which Venus, and only Venus, will reveal?”

The men turn and face their guiding light. It strikes them that such a question, posed by such a learned and well-cogged man, might be right on.

“South to King George’s Island!” says Cook.

“South!” chant the men.

A southward course is shaped. Cook, remembering his cabbage, goes below deck. His men must eat.

VOICE OVER

Here come the islanders.

[♪ Are you ready for love, are you ready for love ♪]

This is the "Love Island" villa, a home away from home for our group of gorgeous singles.

The villa will overflow with flirting, romance, and a lot of throw pillows.

And what happens during the day in St. Helena will hit your screen that very same night.

So let's get on with it. It's time to meet the girls.

[♪ Are you ready for love, are you ready for love ♪]

ALEXANDRA

Yes!

I'm here!

[♪ Are you ready for love ♪]

CARO

Oh, my God.

ALEXANDRA

I'm Alexandra.

CARO

I'm Caro.

ALEXANDRA

So nice to meet you.

CARO

Oh, my god.

ALEXANDRA

No, no, no.

CARO

I don't know where to start.

Oh, my god.

ALEXANDRA

This is so beautiful.

CARO

Oh, my god.

[Screaming]

Everything is like, wow.

My name is Caro.

I'm 21.

I live in Los Angeles and I'm a marketing student.

I would describe myself as goofy.

Flirty.

Feisty.

And humble.

VOICE OVER

That's a bonus.

CARO

I recently just started loving my hair, so I'm really trying to own it. That would be my number-one best quality.

I love dating apps.

It's like you can manage all the boys.

Going to "Love Island" is like a real-life dating app.

Like, I really am ready to meet someone that I want to spend my life with. I am a great girlfriend with the right guy, and I'm just trying to find the person that has as much love as I do. Okay. Cheers.

ALEXANDRA

Cheers.

CARO

To us finding men.

ALEXANDRA

Not falling for losers.

CARO

No losers.

ALEXANDRA

And let's have the best summer of our lives.

CARO

Yes, girl.

ALEXANDRA

The craziest journey, the craziest journey.

CARO

Let's go!

...

Planet PSO J318.5-22, dancing in the dark, rocking back on her left foot. If asked, she would say this was the tango. "Look at the height of my heels!" she would say. Then she would say, "Does it look like a foxtrot?" A rhetorical question, of course. PSO J318.5-22 likes rhetorical questions, almost as much as she likes dust. The cold dust of her endless floor in space. Was she cold? She was. Worse than cold, she was misunderstood. "Rogue," they called her. "Floating." "Sunless." "Orphan." "But," she said, "I'm just dancing in the dark. Kicking up a cloud here, a cloud there—with my high heels. Isn't that enough? A sun would only take my arms. Sweep me off my feet. Turn on the lights. I'm not ready for any of that."

...

VIII

On the morning of the third day.

Ellipsis, reviewing the shift notes of her drones guarding the beach:

DRONE 1¹ Never heard a worse gong player in my life.

DRONE 2² It's possible he doesn't know how to use the mallet.

DRONE 3³ Even with ear plugs, awful.

DRONE 1 It could be argued as eclectic.

DRONE 2 Genre-bending.

DRONE 3 Experimental, maybe even *hyperspectral*.

DRONE 1 But there is nothing that makes me think, "Healer."

DRONE 2 No magic.

DRONE 3 I had to step away for a few minutes.

...

Is she worried? No. There was a method. There was always a method. The Universe—so old, so tried and tested. She looks up. There He was, God, striking her gong—handsome, she had to admit, in his brown suit.

¹ Also known as "Probably"

² Also known as "Likely"

³ Also known as "Perhaps"

While Cook Is Cooking

The ship, somewhere between Africa and South America. Some of the trustees above deck.

“I used to wake up thinking, Today’s the day I will advance the cause of the Roman Church.” Columbus pauses. “Not anymore.”

“There are two more masts of sails, untapped.”

“Enough to leaf an army.”

“Don’t encourage him.”

“Let’s stay on topic,” says Francis Drake. “There must be hundreds of Spanish ships in these waters.” He looks at the horizon for effect. “I can’t understand why we’re not plundering them.”

The men behold him, dull and dear. The ship, bobbing.

“In that kind of venture,” he continues, “there should be one commander, and I’m pretty sure that’s me.”

Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese gentleman serving the King of Spain, is particularly dull. He is sensitive. “Excuse me,” he says, prancing from the prow, “I don’t want to sound smarter than I am, but—”

Before he can go on, Zosima, a luminary Russian monk, raises his arms and says: “Has anyone seen my mat?”

“Your prayer mat?”

“What a thoughtless question.”

“Some mats have messages like, “Hello,” or, “Welcome.” Some are there for comfort. There are mats for scraping your shoes on—”

Zosima disappears.

“But,” continues Magellan, well poised, “*I* am the Captain General, the Comendador of the Order of Santiago de la Spada, and even though I am quite taken with the idea of watching Venus take a shower in front of the sun—”

“—um—”

“—I am convinced that a higher power is taking us to Molucca for spice. Yes, for spice. I serve the King of Spain, who likes pepper, and whose name is Charles.”

“And I,” says Drake, “serve the Queen of—”

“Nutmeg, I think,” says Admiral Zheng He, interjecting. “No, that’s not right. You see,” he says, “we are going to Calicut.” He reminds the men that *he* is the commander of this expedition, which is about more than just celestial wonder.

“Empires,” says He, “are not very complicated. They are like gardens. Can you build an *Imperial Garden of*, for example, *Peace*, teeming with *Imperial Palaces of Longevity*, for free? No.”

He waits a moment, expecting questions. He goes on:

“Taxes become increasingly important with every new hall of peace and court of peace and tree of peace. Taxes don’t grow on trees. They must be gathered, and it’s helpful to ask nicely. I have found that men are more likely to open their wallets if I lead with, for example, ‘Please, can I buy some nutmeg?’ Of course, the emperor would like to be *friends* with India. Friends being a *loose* term.”

“We left Sanlúcar under my command,” says Magellan, commandeering the conversation, which he felt was lagging. “Nothing has changed.”

No, Zheng He says. *Nanjing* was the port of departure.

“I must have left my mat in Lake Onega,” says Zosima, who had returned empty-handed.

And so on.

“If you’re the captain,” says Brendan the Navigator, looking at Magellan, “and if you’re the captain,” he says, looking at Zheng He, “and if you’re the captain”—looking at Zosima—“who isn’t the captain?” He thought he was being tremendously helpful. He thought he was the captain.

Just then, Captain Cook returns with a proclamation: “Dinner,” he says, “is served.”

The men look at him with longing in their tongues: “If you don’t eat your sauerkraut,” he says, “I’ll whip you.”

Commas

Captain Diogo Cão, massaging some ropes, tells us:

Certainly. King John prefers periods. “Forget commas.” King’s words, not mine, and I owe it to him to do my best, to avoid leaving commas where possible, to place my periods well. Africa is a big page, and we ought to move quickly to the bottom, then on to the next one.

Here I am, sailing quickly down the West African coast, looking for beaches where I can place a period here, a period there, extending Portugal’s sentence as far as I can, hopefully to the Indian Ocean. It is important to spread these periods out, to never let them get too close together, unless . . .

Look—Cabo de Santo Agostinho, the perfect place for a period, like this one, which I hold in my hands, so full and round, and which even bears its own cross, a lovely engraving, the work of the artist Christopher Columbus, a terrible artist, but oh!—what a lovely cross.

I want to get this sentence right, because I believe in the king, and Portugal, and trendy India, which has been terribly misidentified by everyone on this ship, and I believe in the shape of a good, long sentence. The more periods, the better.

I’m not very interested in Venus.

Brendan's Prayer

Shall I abandon, O King of Mysteries, the soft comma of home?

Shall I leave Ireland, my native land, and travel the sea?

Shall I put myself at your mercy, without an astrolabe, without a compass, without fame, without maps?

Shall I throw myself on You, without knowing why, with only sauerkraut to keep me going?

And so on.

Crossing the Line

The sun, vibrating in the sky. The ship, approaching the equator.

“I’m afraid there’s no other way to do it,” says Magellan.

“Do what?” says Brendan.

“Dunk you in the ocean.”

“Dunk me in the ocean?”

“Yes, if you haven’t crossed the line before, you must be dunked, elegantly dunked, like a tea bag. Come.”

Brendan had been standing at the prow, minding his own business, scanning the horizon for the green shores of Paradise, intent to let the *Spirit* blow, to let it blow him there. Around him, some kind of ceremony was taking place, but he had excused himself, choosing instead to revel, joyfully, in *Spirit*. Look, he said to himself, at the mysterious spume. Look at the dolphins. The birds!

Look—Magellan.

Magellan, dragging Brendan before Captain Cook, who had dressed up as King Neptune, beard and all, and was rather enjoying it, judging by the posture of his cog.

“Brendan,” says the King, “have you crossed the line before?”

“All this talk of lines,” says Brendan. “I’m not sure what any of it means. I was just praying, minding my business, and—”

“The *equator*,” says the King. “The *line*. Same thing.”

“Isn’t the equator a cocktail?”

“No,” say the Pilgrim Fathers, who had just been dunked, one by one, in the cold deep. “You’re thinking of the Bloody Mary.”

“Well, we just cocked it, excuse me, crossed it,” says Cook. “And all those who have not yet cocked it—my God, sorry—crossed it must be dunked in the Ancient Order of the Deep.”

“Look,” says Brendan. “I was baptized in the Wedders’ Well at Taberna-Molt, where they used to wash the sheep.”

“This isn’t a baptism.”

“It has all the characteristics of a baptism.”

“I sentence you to three dunks,” says King Neptune, “which is the standard number, and very refreshing, and will make you a beloved member of Neptune’s Court.”

“I don’t want to be a member of Neptune’s Court.”

“You have to.”

Brendan says that he’s quite happy being a member of God’s Court, that he can’t be a member of too many Courts, otherwise he’ll lose himself. This is not what anyone wants to hear, and the captains dunk him in the ocean three times.

Then, the sun. Vibrating as usual. Growing larger by the dunk.

IX

There is only one suit, He said famously, a brown suit, and not one to contradict Himself, God wore it every day, even on the island. He hadn't washed His suit in eons, but He didn't sweat, He rarely knelt, and when He ate dinner, and poured His wine, He wiped his hands on a napkin instead of His trousers. All that said, God was humble. Why dress to impress when you could just impress, which is what He was doing now, in His brown suit, the patched arms swinging back and forth in terrible motions, making a course—or was it a curse?—of vibrations in His gong, bronzing the air into currents of sound, a passage vibrating into life. Oh, God, how terrible the sound!

X

Later on the third day. Ellipsis, beginning to wonder about God's utility, or lack of utility, and his struggle to produce a crop of men.

... Have you ever thought about—

GOD About what?

... About taking—

GOD Taking?

... (flustered). Taking a shower.

GOD What for—

... Inspiration.

GOD That's self-evident.

... Also, you're sweating.

GOD I don't sweat.

He is sweating profusely.

... There is a man I'd like you to meet.

GOD A man?

... Jacob.

GOD Do I know him?

... He keeps to himself at the top of a ladder.

GOD That ladder over there?

They look inland where a tall ladder divides the island.

GOD The one made of hot fiery metal . . .

. . . Yes.

GOD I will need a good pair of shoes.

. . . And gloves.

GOD Nikes, perhaps. Or boots. Melt-free, preferably.

. . . Not something you can handle?

GOD I'm of a Higher Order. Give me firmaments. Shoelaces
escape me.

Elli, slipping away.

XI

Later on the third day.

God, playing the gong.

God, in the shower.

God, cleaning.

He had found a particularly potent chemical in Elli's bathroom. He scrubs the disk of the gong into a mirror.

"What's this?" He couldn't remember the last time He had seen Himself. Behind him, the bungalow. Cliffs. The bourgeois blue of the sky.

He regards His quarks with indifference. His brown suit is looking fresh. He poses, struts, cocks His hips to the side, and pouts, too. He is bored, only slightly surprised that He is balding.

"Don't be alarmed," says . . . , who had returned with boots and gloves. "I think you're very handsome," she says.

He says, "The water pressure in your shower is great."

Lovemaking.

Afterwards, God climbs the ladder, leaving his gong swaying on the beach, milking the horizon of definition. The ladder is hard and sharp and hot. He slips, burns his arm, and slips again.

Columbus's Letter To Beatrice, Redacted For Brevity

Dearest,

I am sending you this letter by pigeon. We have been threatened by a most perverse individual, an Englishman, whose actions three days ago continue to haunt me. At the risk of sounding sad, I must be honest: he is bringing me down [. . .]

The day began as it always does. I pissed, pooped, and picked up my binoculars [. . .] The sea was calm. At around ten o'clock a gannet came to the ship, and I had to pinch myself because they don't fly too far from land. Then it rained, just a drizzle—another sure sign of land.

Not long after, I made a disturbing discovery: we were naked. *Almighty God*, I said, *in whose hands all victories are found, is this my lot?* He said it was [. . .] and he hoped it would lead me to my Undies, where people were waiting to be baptized and saved from Hell [. . .]

I noticed we were steering South, and it crossed my mind that we ought to steer West [. . .]

No doubt you have heard of the Undies and [. . .]. Well, just as I was getting comfortable at the helm, steering us into the sun, guess who comes waltzing up from a little nap, flaunting his big member—the Englishman.

[. . .] I will have to tell you more in my next letter. For now, know that my love for you—and also for the King of Spain, without whose ship I would not have been able to call at your island and meet you ten days ago, and fall deeply in love with you, despite having a wife who I also care about—is stronger than the evil English. I will prevail. I will find my Undies. The thought of you, and your pool, give me strength.

Yours,

Christopher

XII

God, at the top of the ladder. He enters a hut made of stained glass. Jacob greets him. Hair long, cheeks sage, she has the appearance of a saint.

GOD Elli said you were a man.

JACOB My pronouns are unfaithful.

GOD What's that supposed to mean?

JACOB The age of man is over.

GOD Right on.

JACOB What can I do for you?

GOD I wasn't told.

JACOB I've heard you down there on the beach.

GOD Good things, I hope.

JACOB It's not like there's no room for improvement.

GOD I've never played an instrument before.

JACOB Think of it as a human, or plant. Something of that order.

GOD Entirely different kettle of fish.

JACOB Come.

God follows Jacob into a room of gongs at the end of the hut. They are gorgeous. Standing beside one, she begins to talk about the creative process.

JACOB All worlds, you will recall, begin with a warm-up.

GOD This isn't a lecture, is it?

JACOB Do you have somewhere to be?

God says no, not really. Jacob says pay attention.

JACOB As you can see, this gong is big and buoyant, and because it is so big and buoyant, it speaks very late when you hit it.

(She grabs a mallet.)

JACOB Simply warm it up, like so, to get the vibrations going in the metal.

(She tickles the gong with her mallet.)

GOD You have lovely hands.

JACOB No rubbing. Light taps only. Tap tap tap. Just to get the vibrations going

GOD To help it find its voice.

JACOB Very good.

GOD And where must I thwack it?

JACOB Where do you think?

GOD Here.

God, rubbing the nipple. Jacob, shaking her head. She strikes the gong a little off center. Her movement is orderly and casual, even dull, as if she were directing traffic with a cigarette.

A low, full, trembling sound fills the room, almost chic.

God takes the mallet in his hands.

JACOB Soft, soft. You have to be soft.

Again

The ship, leaving Rio de Janeiro.

That morning, the sun had appeared with hallucinating force, drawing the men to the side of the ship like moths. They lick their lips.

Then the mallet, rifting the orb apart, turning its reflections into millions of wheels on the water.

“Good morning, Captain,” says Admiral Zheng He.

“Good morning, Admiral,” says Captain Khashkhash.

“Another day near Paradise,” says Brendan, “if it weren’t for the sun.”

“Very lovely day near Paradise, nonetheless.”

“Even in the vicinity of Christ, terror.”

“No neighborhood is safe.”

Eventually, the sun subsides. A fair, strong, and prosperous wind takes the ship into an estuary along the coast of South America.

The usual cases of mistaken identity ensue, much to the disappointment of Captain Cook, who has given up correcting the expedition:

“We have found the Northwest passage,” says Captain Bering.

“Surely you are mistaken, sir,” says Captain Cartier. “This is the Saint Lawrence river, which suggests we are in New France.”

“Good men,” says Magellan. “I hate to be the one to tell you, but welcome to Patagonia.”

Disappointment

Diogo Cão talking to Juan Ponce de León on the poop.

“You know when you’re trying–”

“Trying to what–”

“Trying to finish–”

“–a book?”

“No, a sentence.”

“Oh?”

“And someone keeps–”

“–spoiling the ending? Dreadful.”

“Interrupting you.”

“No, not at all.”

“That’s what this voyage feels like. A series of incorrigible interruptions.”

“Can’t say I agree.”

“I expected better periods on the way to India.”

“Have you spoken to Christopher?”

“Should I?”

“I think he feels the same way. He’s very friendly. Such a gentle heart. I think he feels a bit misunderstood.”

“That brief affair must have really–”

“–taken a toll, yes.”

Diogo Cão goes looking for Columbus.

New Ground

Viking Leif Ericson, talking to his therapist, Captain Francis Drake.
The Viking on a Victorian daybed, outstretched, arms behind his neck.

“I’m happy I found you,” says Leif.

“Me too,” says Drake.

“I have trust issues.”

“Anything else?”

“A fear of bathrooms.”

“There are normally three big ones. Can you think of one more?”

“I used to be close to my dad, but we drifted apart.”

(Drake taking notes, tickling his mustache.)

“Would you say there’s an ocean between you?”

“Is that pun historical or geographical?”

“Should I ask the question again?”

“I replay this memory in my mind. We were on our way to board this ship. Dad on a pony. The farrier must have been drunk when he trimmed the hooves. Or maybe the ground was silty and wet. But dad fell off. He ripped his jeans. ‘A sign,’ he said, ‘that I must stay.’”

“Do you believe in signs?”

“I don’t remember. It’s like I fell asleep and woke up here, on this ship, which I’m sure is my ship, but it’s not long and open like my knorr.”

“Do you fear God?”

“I just found out about him.”

“First impressions?”

“He seems nice.”

“Is Dad a fan?”

“Who?”

(Drake looks bewildered and bored at the same time.)

“Well, the king likes God,” says Leif, “and I like the king.” He pauses, thinks. “So I can’t complain.”

“Have you ever imagined the future without yourself in it?”

“That’s a bit metaphysical.”

“Have you?”

“Dad found a continent. It’s not like I’m encouraged to think about death.”

Dinner

The ship, in the troughs of the waves, rolling down the east coast of South America. Vasco da Gama and Magellan below deck, eating their apportioned sauerkraut.

“I hate your bells,” says Magellan. “They really bring me down. I hear them all day, bells, bells, ring, ring, ring.”

Vasco da Gama tells Magellan they will be a great hit in India. “You know what this needs?” he says, talking about the sauerkraut.

“Don’t say salt.”

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

“What then?”

“It needs honey.”

They go looking for Captain Covilhao, who had made a name for himself as a honey boy. They find him measuring jars of honey for John Cabot, who had rejoined the expedition. He had lost his purse.

“That was John,” Covilhao says when da Gama and Magellan put their bowls of sauerkraut in front of him. “Thought we’d lost him.”

“We would like to buy some honey.”

“How much.”

“Enough to fill this globe,” says Magellan, who had been carrying a globe of the world around his neck so that no one could steal it.

The North Star

Night. The ship, far south of the equator.

Captain Ahmad Ibn Mājid tells us:

I was just sitting around on my ship, eating my sauerkraut, looking for the North Star with my kamal, hoping to figure out how many fingers we were from Hormuz, coming to terms with the fact that our venture was about more than just trade and spice—it was about science, too—when Xu Fu comes tiptoeing down the deck. He was looking pretty *sneaky* and I had to say something.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

Clearly, he had thought he was alone, and he had to compose himself, hide the shock, so to speak.

“I know the way to eternal spice,” he said.

I asked him if he didn’t mean eternal life, and he said he did.

“I’m often confused,” he told me, “but you’re right. I know the way.”

I have to admit I was intrigued. I wasn’t getting any younger. The North Star was still hiding. It was getting tedious—all this searching for a star. What did I have to lose?

I decided then and there that I would stop looking at the sky, and start thinking about the future. I said farewell to Hormuz, and Muscat, and Riyadh.

Out loud, on that cool night, I said it was time to go east.

I looked out across the deck and felt absolutely sad, thinking of all the times I had been dreaming of the North Star while people like Leif Ericson and Francis Drake had scrubbed the deck and oiled their cogs. Just then, I saw Captain Cook looking at me. So, we weren’t alone, Xu

Fu and I. I said, "Captain, do you want to live forever?" And he said, "Ok," and I felt absolutely sad, thinking about all the times he had said No, not really.

XIII

The fifth day. God, making no progress whatsoever.

... I have never believed in ear plugs. Until now.

THE UNIVERSE Are you sure there isn't a piano nearby?

... I'm not a fan of classical music.

THE UNIVERSE Jazz?

...

THE UNIVERSE A pity. God has such lovely—

... Lovely what?

THE UNIVERSE Talents. (*A pause*). We had forgotten about Jacob and her good influence.

... How could you forget about Jacob?

THE UNIVERSE Time. Space. Time and Space.

Later—Ellipsis, addressing God.

... Jacob would like to see you.

GOD Okay.

God climbs the ladder and finds the old woman in bed.

JACOB There are reports. From Paris.

GOD (holding his breath). Reports?

JACOB Your son has taken leave of the throne.

GOD That's annoying. I asked him not to do that. I should probably go back.

JACOB You should fix your style.

GOD Brown suits are timeless. When I think of the future, they're very present.

JACOB At the gong.

GOD Oh, that.

JACOB (handing Him a new mallet). Here.

God descends. On the beach, He strikes a fine pitch, trembling with royal decree. Elli listens from her bungalow above the beach, leaving her ear plugs on the table. She is full of sound.

The Sun, Again

According to the captains, who had noticed an improvement:

“It used to be that when I looked up at the sun and listened, against my will, to the vibrations caused by the mallet, I thought, Hmm, that sounds like a thousand terrible trumpets, but now when I look up, still very much against my will, I can’t help thinking that it sounds like only a hundred terrible trumpets, which strikes me as an improvement.”

“Or a hundred terrible tumbrils.”

“Yes, that’s a good way of putting it, too.”

“Worse, though—much worse than Vasco’s bells.”

“Just absolutely dreadful, and sad, too, this solar music.”

“Not your ordinary celestial din, not at all.”

“Not only is he a poor player, that chap wielding the mallet, perhaps without the money for lessons, or maybe he is just lazy. He also plays with the heart of someone very broken.”

“Yes, you can tell, can’t you.”

The men pray for ear plugs and before long they arrive in the form of rain-clouds. They praise God. Still, the sun persists.

“Should we make an offering?”

“A sacrificial victim?”

“There’s a goat in the hold.”

They throw the goat overboard. The sun stops. They cheer.

New Ground

Juan Ponce de León, talking to his therapist, Francis Drake:

“You were recommended,” says León.

“It happens,” says Drake.

“I’ll get straight to the point: I’m in love.”

“Be honest.”

“She’s young, and I’m, er, getting on.” *He has wrinkles and bad knees.*

“But you’re a governor.”

“And fabulously rich.”

Drake doodles.

“For example, I own the Ocean.”

“But not Life and Time.”

“Or Youth and Health,” he says.

“Tell me about your dreams,” says Drake.

“I’m sure you’ve heard them before.”

“Tell me.”

“There’s this little franchise—”

“Is this a dream or a story?”

“An important distinction?”

“Stories are boring.”

“What about a dreamy story, at least.”

They are interrupted by sound, dark and junior like breaking rocks. The sun sets. Around them the sky and ocean, gray.

“Let’s change course: your relationship with your father.”

“What does this have to do with my situation?”

“Your situation?”

“My advancing age.”

“More than you think,” says Drake.

“I have a good relationship with my dad. He loves me. He gave me a goat.”

“Have you ever considered,” says Drake, “that Youth is irretrievable?”

“I have.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

“Smelly.”

Drake has a final question: “How would you like to be remembered?”

“Footnotes are fine.”

“I mean in terms of appearances.”

“Well, I couldn’t help noticing that some of the men are missing—”

“—missing what?”

“Certain *aspects*.”

He avoids looking at Drake’s cog.

“Chiseled off, yes—during a darker spiritual time.”

“Stored somewhere safe, I presume.”

“In the Vatican. Under the Pope’s pillow.”

Juan Ponce de León has had enough. He gets up. He’ll do it alone. He walks to the poop where he will watch the waves crash against the bow while contemplating big questions, like, What kind of pillow does the Pope like? and, Will he ever die?

“I see sharks, lobsters, whales,” he says. “I see the follicles of hairy seaweed, I see salps and squirts, the quarks of sea phlegm, the scales of fish—beauty, beauty all around me, but none of it brings me pleasure.”

A Lie

Captain Ahmad Ibn Mājid tells us:

What Xu Fu didn't tell me is that the elixir of life was not necessarily for us, but for a man by the name of Qin Shi Huang, First Emperor of the Qin dynasty, who was getting on in years.

When I asked if we couldn't have just a little sip, a tiny sip of the elixir of life, Xu Fu said not necessarily. The emperor was lonely. He would notice.

I felt misled. I felt like I had sold my star for a lie.

Nonetheless I went ahead with the plan, knowing that when the discovery was made, I would use my knowledge of navigation and machinery to overpower Xu Fu. I would not let thoughts of wrath deter me. Emperors are known for wrath. I thought of other things, like sauerkraut, which was in good supply on the ship.

ALEXANDRA

I'm Alexandra.

I'm 26.

I'm originally from Philadelphia.

I now live in Los Angeles.

I'm a beauty publicist in Beverly Hills.

The men in Los Angeles, they drive cars they can't afford, and they're 65 and they think they can pick up women that are 20 to 25, which is disgusting.

That's why I'm in St. Helena. Loving—looking for love.

I'm totally looking for a guy that's my boyfriend and my best friend.

I'm a puppy.

I need attention.

I like to wake up and nuzzle and be like, Hi.

Girl code is one of the most important things to me.

If I make a huge connection with a girl code in the villa, I'm never going to step on her toes.

My last boyfriend cheated on me, and I just haven't been ready to open up to someone and kind of give my all.

I think I'm ready to find a guy that has a great personality and get to know them and not just go for the looks.

Find me man, please.

Wait, this is a shower.

CARO

Oh, my gosh.

ALEXANDRA

This is a shower.

CARO

This is Instagram worthy.

MALLORY

Hi, guys.

CARO

Oh, my gosh.

ALEXANDRA

Are you so excited?

MALLORY

I'm Mallory.

CARO

Mallory, hi.

ALEXANDRA

I'm Alex.

MALLORY

Hi, Alex, nice to meet you.

CARO

I'm Caro.

MALLORY

You're a bombshell.

CARO

Bombshell!

ALEXANDRA

Oh, my god.

MALLORY

Are you so excited?

ALEXANDRA

I can't wait to meet the boys.

CARO

Cheers.

MALLORY

Cheers.

ALEXANDRA

Oh, my gosh.

Cross

The ship is leaving Patagonia.

Diogo Cão, researching the kinds of periods used by other formidable men. He poses a question to Jacques Cartier, a sensitive Frenchman, and Ferdinand Magellan, a sensitive Portuguese. The three of them are sitting on the bowsprit, naked. Ahead of them, waves.

“I left one in Patagonia, just yesterday, remember?” says Magellan, patting Cartier on the back. “On top of that mountain along the coast, as a sign, a good sign, that this land now belonged to the king of Spain. What did we call the summit?”

“Mount Christ?”

“Mount Christ! An appropriate name, wouldn’t you agree?”

Cartier couldn’t agree more, and he says as much, and more, too:

“Well,” he says, “don’t *you* remember, just yesterday as well, ha!, when we were sailing along the East Coast of New France,” he says, “passing Cap D’Espoir, when bad weather hit.”

“I remember,” says Magellan.

“In a certain Bay of Gaspé we found shelter and 200 Iroquois.”

“Giants, you mean.”

“No, not giants, not at all. They were fishing on the peninsula, remember? I introduced myself to a Mr. Donnacona, the chief. We had a jolly little picnic, all of us together. Laughing, they giving us fish, we giving them verbs, and it dawned on me how lovely a big Jesus cross would look right there.”

“How lovely, yes, indeed!” Magellan regrets engaging the Frenchman, whose sentences were much longer than his, and nonsensical at best. They had been in Patagonia.

“Well,” continues Cartier, “I had the men get to work immediately after lunch. A beautiful cross rose up tall, 30 feet, no less—what a peninsula it was then!”

“A cross!”

“But sadly, and for reasons I would never know, Donnacona was less than pleased.”

“Hmm,” says Magellan.

“I couldn’t for the life of me understand. ‘Haven’t you seen one of these before?’ I said—”

“As I would have said, too—”

“—as you did say, you were there, and very polite. ‘No,’ said he, and he looked quite unwell. ‘Well, all the better then,’” I said.

“Yes, yes, I remember!”

“But Donnacona—he remained disappointed about the cross and, seeing the way some of his men were sharpening their verbs, I had to change my approach. ‘As it happens, this is a terribly insignificant thing, this cross,’ I said, looking the cross up and down, tapping it with my hat. ‘You really oughtn’t to worry about this cross, this little cross, which is just a bit of wood and white paint. Me and my men, we do this everywhere, a trifle, a way to pass the time, it’s how we get the sauerkraut down, ha!’ Not long after that we set sail back to Old France with two of Donnacona’s lovely boys.”

No Man's Land

Pytheas had lost his gnomon. This was a problem, for without that wooden rod of fixed length, he could not compare the length of a shadow to determine how far north they were.

There might have been other rods on board the ship, in fact there probably were, but a few mornings after his loss he awoke from particularly stirring dreams and saw his cog brilliant and upright.

It was the same length as his missing gnomon.

He quickly advertised his discovery to the men. They had been spending sleepless nights not knowing where they were going because they had no tools to measure a shadow.

When Pytheas sat before them, his gnomon hard and functional, they measured the shadow falling to the right of his thigh. To his great sadness, they were far south, far, far south, almost to what Cook described as the Strait of Magellan, which, unsurprisingly, piqued the interest of the man of that name.

“I don't know why it's named for you,” said Captain Cook, “but we're not taking that route to King George's Island. We are going to round the cape instead.”

And so the ship continued south, all the way to Cape Horn, which Bartholomou Dias confused with the Cape of Storms, which was actually the Cape of Good Hope, at the tip of Africa.

Pytheas kept his gnomon erect until it began to ache, stroking it now and then to keep the fire going. He refused to let it go or so much as lean it to the left, for such a movement could jeopardize his navigation, and thus the entire voyage.

Respect

There is a certain decor of respect, thought Xu Fu, that the men on board his ship lacked. Not everyone knew the way to the elixir of life.

He did.

He made his way to the helm. It was occupied by Ahmad ibn Mājīd.

“Excuse me, Captain,” said Xu Fu, “can I use that after you?” He pointed at the helm.

“Yes,” said Ibn Mājīd, who was looking at the stars. “I’m just taking us to Jeddah. But it’s all yours after that. I believe in fairness. I like a rules-based order, something that the collective can rely on. And the golden rule is: you wait in line. You wait in line and before you know it, you’re shooting the breeze, and before you know it, you’re in Mecca.”

See, this is what he was talking about. Ignorance, perhaps, more than a lack of respect. Did no one think about the future?

Goat

Zosima, searching for solitude, tells us:

Marco Polo had brought his manuscript to dinner again. The third night in a row. He found his page—just off the island of Zipangu, on his way to Zai-tun, ever in the graces of the Alchemical Khan.

There is only so much a man can stomach, and the idea of listening to more stories about worshipers of idols while I was trying to enjoy my sauerkraut, a food I happen to like, especially on its own, without salt, was, frankly, unsettling.

So I took my mug of k down to the hold, and what did I see there in the shadows but a golden goat.

Now my first thought was the goat looked pretty tired, as if it had traveled round the world and back a few times. I knew she was tired because she was pawing and looking at her sides and I could see some discharge from her vulva, a sure sign of tiredness.

I wondered why she was bleating so loudly. Then it occurred to me that she was in labor, this golden goat. Just as I was savoring my last spoon of k, I saw the tips of a nose and some toes coming out of her vagina, as if the little kid was diving into the hold. It was a surprising development.

I was even more surprised—maybe even a bit shocked—when I saw the kid was actually an astrolabe. I thought, Fancy giving birth to the universe in the belly of a ship—and the mother a goat, of all things!

Well, I thought, thank God for Marco Polo. If it weren't for him, I'd have missed the birth of a world. Even idol worshippers have their place.

That was the last I saw of the goat.

MALLORY

Hi, guys.

My name is Mallory.

I'm 26.

I'm from Portland, Oregon.

I'm an analyst for a sportswear company.

Everybody has their own special color and they work it like a star.

My dating history is a little rocky. I'll go on a couple dates and they'll be really good. I'll feel like I have a connection, then the guy just disappears.

I don't think I give off a crazy vibe.

I'm like, Date me, you know?

I think I'm kind of cool.

CARO

Kind of.

MALLORY

So the good thing with "Love Island" is the guys can't get away from me.

There's nowhere to hide.

I will find you.

I am very ready for love.

My time is ticking.

I don't want to look old in my wedding pictures.

Literally on my Instagram, I have photos of my wedding dress, the venue, the rings, kids names are picked out.

Mallory, Jr., has a ring to it.

I have it all planned out.

I just need a guy.

ALEXANDRA

So what's your type?

MALLORY

I like someone who is artistic and creative.

I like graphic design, and photographers.

I like guys that are pursuers. If they like me, they will let me know.

I love funny people.

They have to make me laugh.

Hi.

ALANA

Oh, my god.

XIV

Early afternoon on the sixth day.

God, using the little boy's room in Jacob's hut. *What a lovely stained glass window, he thinks. What a lovely place to pee. What lovely, lovely glass.*

He sees the stain of his son on the throne. There's his mom.

And a sign.

"Do not open."

He opens the window. For the first time He sees the other side of the island.

"What's this," He says, "if it isn't a sprawling industrial complex."

Down below, God saw large forms, the most striking of which was the architectural embodiment of Ellipsis herself: about a mile in from a green shore, just below the ladder, three domes side by side.

"I am suspicious," He says later that evening. Six glasses of wine had made Him tipsy. It was hot. He was wearing His suit.

"Of what," says Elli.

"Your operations, your uses, your insights, and your offerings."

"Can you be more specific?"

"Elli, my dearest dear, be honest: what's on the other side of the island? Today I saw three big domes from Jacob's bathroom. While I was peeing."

"You were peeing?"

"I was feeling bold."

“That window isn’t meant to be opened.”

“I opened it.”

“Well, there’s a fountain . . .”

“A fountain?”

“It’s a bit misleading.”

“Tell me about it.”

“When you think, ‘Fountain,’ you don’t typically think, ‘Reservoir of toxic waste,’ but that’s exactly what it is,” she says. “A bit of a design flaw, really. But we need to put it *somewhere*.”

“Your waste.”

“My waste.”

“What kind of waste?”

“Nuclear waste.”

“Now that’s a surprise.”

God, playing the gong. He had learned what to do. With every strike he gave birth to another France, or so he thought.

XV

Late afternoon on the sixth day.

God, lying on the beach, resting in the shadow of his gong, a cool shadow. Elli, giving him a massage.

“People feared me, Elli. They really feared me.”

“You were bold. You had a bold vision.”

“Was I too much?”

“The English were suspicious.”

“The English are always suspicious.”

“Didn’t like it when you stopped their ships.”

“Policy. Pure policy.”

“What were the words they used?”

“‘You disturb the peace of Europe!’ or something like that.”

“That was later.”

“I have always had the best interests of France in mind.”

“And Europe.”

“Yes, Europe. But France, mostly.”

“You never had a thing for kings, queens, and castles.”

“Never.”

“Only private property, the rule of law, and personal freedom.”

“As I like to say, ‘I like man,’ and I like the idea that all men are born pretty much equal, even some of their souls.”

“Unless they’re English.”

“Unless they’re English.”

“In that case, force is required.”

“Terrible, brutal, deathly force.”

“For the upkeep of the empire.”

“For the peace of France.”

“This is not a peaceful age.”

“Rather, it is an age of technique.”

“Which brings us to Waterloo . . .”

“I don’t want to talk about Waterloo.”

“A blip, then.”

“Yes, a blip, a little scratch on the side of the future.”

“Then the future of France is secure.”

“It would be.”

“But—”

“Here I am, in your abyss, surrounded by wine and waste, learning a new instrument, trying to take care of my mental health, reading, and, I’ll be honest, wondering if you’re keeping something from me, something significant and atrocious and foundational.”

“Some call it the best of all possible worlds.”

“That’s a very German thing to say, and I understand why they’d say it, being German, but Germany is not France.”

For the Queen

Since vacating his barrel, Vasco Núñez de Balboa had been making up for lost time. He went around introducing himself, getting some sun on his hair, which reeked of wine, saying things like, “Has anyone found a new ocean?”

Magellan, thinking hard, said he might have.

Captain Cook went as far as saying they were on one now, a very peaceful ocean, but few people believed him, especially Balboa, who said that “peaceful” was hardly the right name for these waters, which were gray and hazardous and smelt like roots.

“I can tell you,” said Cook, “this is the Pacific.”

“He’s right,” said Magellan.

“Yes,” said Drake, “absolutely right.” He was deeply moved by this ocean, its *potential*, and what it *represented*. He was so moved by these things that he started running around repeating obscure coded messages like, “The Fucking Spanish.” A resolute faith, perhaps: “If anyone sees a Spanish ship,” he said, “I’ll make you a governor.”

“That’s not how it works,” said Abel Tasman.

“We’re on a Spanish ship,” said Vasco da Gama, faithful to the facts of his mind.

“We must make a pit stop at the harbor of Valparaiso,” said Drake.

“For what?” asked Cook.

“For the Queen of England. Specifically, her purse.”

“Did she insist?”

“She did.”

They stop at Valparaiso and Drake fills his purse. They also stop at the harbor of Lima.

Drake, plundering.

Then, a westward course is shaped. Above them, the sun, hanging there—just hanging there—that giant, patient disk.

MALLORY

Oh, my god.

ALANA

I'm Alana.

I'm 21.

I'm a student from Connecticut.

If you like good vibes, you'll like me.

I think my personality is a good quality.

And if you're going to make it physical, I got a nice butt.

I really do.

Fun fact, I have never ever had a boyfriend.

I've been in six relationships.

It just never works out.

I don't know how to flirt, but I feel like if you end things with a suggestive question, it makes it more sexy.

MALLORY

Are those khaki?

ALANA

Mmm.

MALLORY

Like who wears khaki?

ALANA

Are those flip-flops?

MALLORY

Mmm.

ALANA

Like, I've seen a flip-flop.

Oh, man.

I need to be in a solid, committed relationship.

I'm tired of soft situationships.

I'm going to let Jesus take the wheel.

Let's see how this turns out.

MALLORY

I love your hair.

ALANA

Oh, thank you.

MALLORY

I love it.

ALANA

Thank you so much.

ELIZABETH

Hi, guys.

How are you?

ALANA

Oh, my gosh.

ELIZABETH

I'm so nervous.

MALLORY

Don't be.

ALANA

Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, hi.

ELIZABETH

Can I say something?

I'm Elizabeth.

I'm 24.

I live in New York, and I work in advertising.

I'm definitely a good girlfriend, but I'm very dramatic, but whenever I get the stomach flu, I will lay on the floor in the bathroom and call my family to come say good-bye to me.

I'm like, I'm passing, come say good-bye.

I have been in love before once.

I dated a guy, and a couple years later I found out he was cheating on me.

So maybe I am a little more reserved now when it comes to trusting people or opening up to finding love.

But I think it's also been enough time that I would be ready to put myself out there again.

I don't like facial hair.

If I saw a guy with facial hair, I would be like, oh, you're so cute. I'm into you, but would you shave your beard and your mustache?

ALANA

What if he said no?

ELIZABETH

He would have to.

MALLORY

Do you model?

ELIZABETH

I do.

MALLORY

I wouldn't have guessed.

VOICEOVER

Now that the girls have had seven seconds to really get to know each other, let's meet our host, Arielle.

ARIELLE

Hi, ladies.

MALLORY

Hey!

ARIELLE

Who's ready for a summer of love.

ALANA

We are.

[Cheering]

ARIELLE

How exciting is this?

ALANA

It's so exciting.

ARIELLE

I feel like I'm with all my children.

XVI

After dinner on the sixth day. Ellipsis, updating The Universe, who had stopped by. God sleeping at her feet, snorting, dreaming.

... He sleeps a lot.

THE UNIVERSE Recovering from something significant which He can't remember.

... Troubling.

THE UNIVERSE It's like there's a fatality attached to Him. A bug of some kind. (*Pause*). What do you know about sleep, anyway.

... I know it's distracting Him from the task at hand.

THE UNIVERSE Your methods are obscure.

... What can I say?

THE UNIVERSE When we asked for a sun, we thought you might bang a bit of helium and hydrogen together, for example.

... A dull affair, don't you think?

THE UNIVERSE I guess you can make a sun out of anything.

... Love, for example. *People*.

THE UNIVERSE God, the possibilities are endless, really.

The Universe goes in for a fist bump. Just then, God wakes up from troubled dreams and the Universe disappears. He had heard His name.

GOD Who was that?

... Oh, no one.

Worship

The ship, moving west into the Pacific.

Pytheas was sitting on the quarterdeck, minding his own business, which happened to be his cog. Once again it was upright and casting a shadow to the south. The shadow was long. So long it crossed the deck, rose over the windlass, and came to an end where Marco Polo was sitting on the seat of ease.

“That’s a long shadow,” Marco yelled across the deck. “I look at that shadow and I think of elections!”

“Is there a specific election you think of?” Pytheas yelled back.

“Yes, fancy taking three years to choose a Pope!”

“What’s a pope?” asked Pytheas, rather innocently, as he inspected his election.

“In vain, great Kublai, shall I attempt to describe the Pope—”

“I’m Pytheas.”

“Apologies. The Pope is the Head of the Roman Catholic Church.”

Pytheas, looking down. “I see,” he said. Meanwhile, a line had formed for the seat of ease. Marco sat firm.

“What’s the hold-up?” said Cartier, who was next in line.

“Yeah!” said Leif Ericson, behind him.

“I’m clogged,” said Marco. “Low fiber diet.”

While they waited, the men watched Pytheas worship the sun, which had been hovering for longer on the horizon, as if it had nowhere else to be. When the men lost interest in the shadow, they knelt in front of the compass.

According to Ahmad Ibn Mājid:

“This sun points north. It’s cold. Magnetic. *Modern*. Something you can keep in your pocket and grab when there’s a need.”

He went on: “If my sun points north, I know where I am.”

Leif Ericson didn’t know if he could endure another second of all this worship while he waited in line for the seat of ease. What happened to the days when a man could just go north, keeping the sun at his back during the day and following the North Star by night? He sat over the side of the ship and made his bladder gladder.

“I’m my own man,” he said.

XVII

The morning of the seventh day.

God, sitting on the porch of Jacob's hut, sharing His dreams over a cup of coffee to avoid talking about His music.

"I am tormented by terrible thoughts," He says.

"What thoughts?" says Jacob.

"Masculine thoughts."

"Go on."

"I see a ship."

"A ship."

"But not just any ship."

"Go on."

"A ship of cogs, for want of a better word."

"Cogs."

"Yes, but thinking things. Speaking things. Which strikes me as odd. There they are, these not insignificant cogs, rising up and down the deck, pointing this way and that. Sometimes they argue. Sometimes they command. There's an almost universal quality to the way they argue and command, as if they've never been content with their place in the world. As if they are working together to escape. A united front of cogs. At times, I hear them say my name. It's quite special, when you think about it."

"Odd because cogs don't think?"

"Not that I know of."

“Describe the image, or the thought, or the idea, or whatever it is that torments you.”

“It is the cog,” says God.

“Its image?”

“I’m finding it hard to focus.”

“You could take a deep breath.”

“ . . . ”

“Knowledge is strength, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know.”

Jacob had some sage advice. She had been reading Augustine.

“My suggestion, and you can take it or leave it, is you turn away from these cogs, and instead look inward, that is, to your Truth, which is grasped by the intellect and the inner mind, which ever abides and exists always the same, which presents no false image from which it cannot be distinguished.”

God says okay.

“Then, of course, there are the ancients, who expressed their sublime thoughts better than anyone. Have you read Sophocles? He deals with this very subject in his plays. Oedipus, for example.”

“Are you suggesting I get rid of my eyes?”

“You could sell them.”

“But I haven’t slept with my mom.”

“Ah.” (*She sips her coffee*). “Not willingly, maybe.”

“I have a pretty good grip on my will.”

“Even down there on the beach?”

“If you’re suggesting . . . ”

“I’m merely stating—”

“Ellipsis?”

“She’s unassuming, I know.”

God throws his coffee over the balcony and descends the ladder in a huff. Elli, waiting for Him on the beach, pointing to the gong.

“Jacob insinuated that you’re my mom. I’ve tried taking insinuations with a pinch of salt, but I happen to believe her, which begs the question: Are you French?”

“Jacob is full of theories.”

“To think I slept with you, right here on this very beach.”

“We have better things to think about.” She points to the horizon.
“Like that.”

“A ship,” He says.

“A ship,” she says.

“And yet,” He says, watching the ship move up the coast, “it appears this ship is passing us, as if we are merely specks, trivial and inconsequential specks, or lizards, or chickens, or maybe even shells on a distant, vapid shore, supremely lost to the world and all its ports and purveyors. I fear I will be overlooked, and forgotten, again—at a time when all I need is warmth, consolation, and an honest embrace.”

“Anything else?”

“No, thanks.”

Elli reiterates a divine plan, that He shouldn’t worry, that she found Him incorrigible when He worried.

“Come,” she says. They make love among the beached jellyfish.

Troubled Dreams

In the latest installment of troubled dreams, Captain Cook receives the vision of a granola bar. The granola bar is dressed in a formidable attire of dark chocolate, peanut & almond.

“Please,” says Cook, “let me alone!”

The bar stands tall and firm, an apparition of unparalleled glory. Then, it kicks one of Cook’s cabbages with the skill of a good English forward. The cabbage flies into a dark net, a whistle blows, the ship sinks. He wakes up, understandably troubled.

“Peanuts!” he sighs. “I could have packed some peanuts.”

A few hammocks down, Ferdinand Magellan sees the King of Portugal in his dreams. The king is dressed in his best Portuguese mantle, an intimidating sight for anyone working for the King of Spain.

“You sold your soul to Spain,” says the King of Portugal.

“If you had believed in me,” Magellan says, “I would have sold it to you.” Could an explorer be so misunderstood? The king kicks Magellan in the cog. He wakes up and sees Cook, dazzled.

Together, they crawl above deck, where they decide it is in their best interests not to fall asleep again. It is unusually hot.

“Is it just me,” says Cook, “or is the sun getting bigger?”

Magellan, staring at the sun. “Yes,” he says. “Louder, too.”

ARIELLE

Hi, guys.

How are you?

How is everybody doing today?

MALLORY

Good.

ALEXANDRA

Excited.

CARO

Excited.

ARIELLE

You guys in the mood for love?

ALANA

Yes!

ARIELLE

You've come to the right place for romance.

The sun is shining.

We're at a beautiful villa in St. Helena.

Pretty soon you will have some gorgeous guys to share it with.
But before you meet them, I need the hot goss.

Caro, what are you looking for on the island?

CARO

I want a guy with genuine intentionings, who wants to settle
down, who doesn't just want a short-term relationship.

ARIELLE

I like that.

Mallory, what kind of man are you looking for?

MALLORY

I like a man who is creative and artistic. I'm not into guys who are super macho or really into numbers.

ARIELLE

You want a little band guy or something?

MALLORY

Ideally.

ARIELLE

John Mayer guy?

MALLORY

Yes!

ARIELLE

That's my type—100%.

MALLORY

Send him my way.

ARIELLE

Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH

I have a defined type.

ARIELLE

Like what?

ELIZABETH

Tall, skinny, handsome.

ARIELLE

Alexandra?

ALEXANDRA

Tall, genuine, funny.

ARIELLE

Alana, how long have you been single?

ALANA

Drum roll, please.

All my life.

ARIELLE

What?

ALANA

Snap.

I have never been in a relationship before.

I'm coming here to change that.

MALLORY

I don't like that.

ARIELLE

I mean, well, you're going to have your first boyfriend in like five minutes.

I'm so excited for you to meet these guys.

Do you want to meet them?

CARO

Yeah.

ELIZABETH

Yes.

ARIELLE

Okay.

Let's go.

Come on down.

ALANA

Oh, my gosh.

ARIELLE

Okay.

This is it, you guys.

This is the moment we've all been waiting for.

MALLORY

I've been waiting for it.

ARIELLE

I bet you have been waiting for it.

You're about to couple-up for the first time.

What that means is you have to pair up with one of the boys.

ALANA

Oh, my gosh, I have goosebumps.

ARIELLE

One by one, the lucky guys will enter the villa and choose one of you.

Before we do, step forward if you're attracted to them.

You have the power to influence their decision.

If you like them, you better step forward because they might get snatched up.

We'll meet the first boy.

MALLORY

Oh, my god, I can't stand it.

ARIELLE

Here we go.

[♪ Are you ready for love, are you ready for love ♪]

Sighting

The ship, in the silver-horned stags of the Pacific, heading west into the disk of the sun. Hot winds blowing strongly from the east.

Juan Ponce de León on the prow, looking for his franchise. Captain Cook, above deck, dreaming of Venus. Vasco da Gama, playing with his bells. Up on the poop, Columbus, looking at the moon. Drake, scanning the horizon for Spanish ships.

And so on.

“Is it just me,” says Drake, “or does the sun look like a large shell?”

“Vibrating on a distant shore?”

“Exactly.”

“We shouldn’t sail too close, should we?” says Pytheas, guarding his shadow.

“That would be unwise,” say the Pilgrim Fathers, tingling.

“But not necessarily undesirable,” says Cook, who could no longer tell if he was steering the ship, or if the ship was steering him.

“If I had brought my ear plugs,” says Magellan, “it would be very desirable. But I left them under the Pope’s pillow.”

“At least you know where they are.”

“It happens a lot. Sometimes, I’ll call him the next morning and say, ‘My Dear Pope, I left my plugs under your pillow,’ and sometimes he’ll tell me, ‘Satan is calling, can you hold the line?’ and so I’ll hold the line, sometimes for hours at a time, only to be hung up on and told by a lowly bishop that the Pope sold my plugs for another day on earth.”

“Satan is always stealing things.”

“Is it possible to resist him? They say it is. But I have my doubts.”

“He’s an absolute menace.”

Cook, sensitive to the needs of his men, steers a northward course around the vibrating sun.

Meanwhile, Zosima, leaning on the gunwales beside the helm, had come to the end of his stick, so to speak. He was getting tired.

“I am coming to the end of my stick,” he says to Brendan the Navigator, who is standing beside him, helping the Russian look for his mat. The two men had bonded over hairstyles earlier in the voyage.

“I like your hair,” Brendan had said to Zosima. But for a thin, perfectly buzzed ring of hair, Zosima was bald. “It smells lovely, too, like a library.”

“We are men of faith.”

“What do you use?”

Zosima said he used *Dove*.

Clearly, this bond over hair was very interesting, and Brendan was surprised that Zosima didn’t take it into account when he said, just then, “Brendan, where’s my fucking mat? I can’t believe you haven’t helped me find my fucking mat. Fuck.” His tone was rich.

“Is your mat short or long?”

Before Zosima can respond, he happens to notice a great pillar rising out of the sea. Then another. Then another.

“Men!” he yells. “Look, the pillars of a mighty church, a mighty church in the sky!”

“A basilica!” cries Columbus. “I saw it first!”

“With three grand domes!”

“Roman domes on a lush green shore!”

“And look: behind them, a ladder!”

“How convenient!”

“How exciting.”

“Are you excited?”

“Is the Pope Catholic?”

“Bells,” says Vasco da Gama. “Hell’s bells.”

“Something tells me this is indeed a basilica,” says Cook, “adorned with three lovely domes, which is strange, but also quite alluring.”

“Molucca!” says Magellan. “We have made it to Molucca!”

“India!” cries Vasco da Gama.

“We must be at King George’s Island.”

Soon, all the captains are kneeling.

“It is good to kneel, to worship, to give thanks,” say the Pilgrim Fathers. “But we can’t see the shores of Cape Cod.”

They stand.

The ship, edging closer.

“Why don’t we celebrate with a song?” says Columbus.

“Something modern?”

“The Greater Doxology?”

“What about something by Patrick?” says Brendan. “*Cry of the Deer* is a classic.”

They settle on the Greater Doxology. They have such a good time that they sing it again. Then:

Juan Ponce de León, tall and handsome, leads the expedition ashore, where they see a clowder of green cats cleaning themselves among the pillars.

“The cats are glowing.”

“In a very non-metaphorical way.”

“Ominous.”

“Unusual.”

“Not some kind of sign, is it?”

“If these feline friends are indeed a sign, they are difficult to understand, and they would do well to communicate their nature with a bit more finesse.”

“Certainly not what I had in mind,” says John Cabot, “when I thought of North America.”

“Or Parodies.”

“Molucca.”

“And Undia.”

“Hello,” says Columbus, addressing the cats, blushing. He asks after the Great Khan, the King of Kings, the Most Serene Prince. “Excuse us,” he says, referring to their situation.

The cats ignore him.

“Oh, my god,” says Juan Ponce de León. He had found a fountain. “Look at this lovely green liquid falling out of a lion’s mouth.”

“What a lovely lion.”

“One of the loveliest lions.”

“But something tells me,” says Léon, overburdened, disappointed, “that this is not the franchise of perpetual youth, but rather the franchise of eternal life.”

“Not everything is the franchise of perpetual youth.”

“I’m going to sniff it.” He sniffs it. “Delicious,” he says, positively stricken.

“Smells like honey,” says Covilhao.

“And old coins,” says Marco Polo.

“A bath for Venus herself.”

The men gather round the fountain, looking at their reflection in the shimmering green slop. Léon stands on the basin ledge, his back to the water, addressing the men:

“Some people,” he says, “believe that living forever in a state of youthful revelry is neither possible nor desirable. But I can confirm that the search for parodies is not only a respectable endeavor, but also over. I once read that the potion to youth is green, sugary, and guarded by strange creatures, and I’ll be damned if this isn’t that.”

None of the men are surprised.

“Get on with it.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“And so I stand before you,” says Léon, getting on with it, “not as a promoter of anti-aging products and therapies—fads! mass-market fads!—but as the future of youth.”

“Is it safe?”

Léon nods.

“We’ll have to see what the shareholders think.”

“They’re always thinking, aren’t they.”

“Hopefully they’ll think of buying it.”

“Something tells me they won’t.”

“They won’t buy it.”

Troubled by this foray into morals and mistakes, Juan Ponce de Léon bends over and sips from the fountain.

“Hand me a mirror,” he says, a second later.

He is handed a mirror.

“According to the literature, I should be young in a wink.”

A few winks pass.

“There is only one thing left to do,” he says, logically.

He swims in the pond. It is hot on the island, hotter than anything they’d ever experienced, and the men follow suit.

“My God, oh, my God, that’s good.”

“Oh, my God.”

Soon, all of them are glowing.

“Let’s build a cross!” says Jacques Cartier.

Then, a song in the air, sweet and tempting and mysterious, coming from one of the domes:

[♪ Baby ... My heart is full of love ♪]

“God, that’s beautiful.”

“Delightful.”

“Impossible to ignore.”

“We shouldn’t follow it, should we?”

“What else are we here for?”

“Should we abandon our resolve and follow that song, whose lilting lyrics will lead us beyond doubt to habitations fit for gentlemen and men of robust and fanciful ability?”

“I can’t remember a thing, including our resolve.”

“Something about underwear.”

“Venus.”

“Nutmeg.”

“An objective, surely.”

“Not sure if we had one to begin with.”

“Absolutely there was an objective.”

The men move in the direction of the song, which leads them into the core of the basilica.

The Cup

Ahmad Ibn Mājid tells us:

What Xu Fu didn't tell me was that he didn't want to exert too much human will on the whole endeavor. What that meant, I came to learn, was that when we came in sight of the land where the elixir of life waited for us, and decisions would have to be made about where we would go ashore—these can be quite logical decisions—Xu Fu threw one of Zheng He's cups in the water. It sank. He found another cup, not made of porcelain, which stayed afloat.

“We will follow the cup,” he said, “and go ashore where it touches land.”

Now, I had come to trust Xu Fu, but this seemed a bit ridiculous, and I told him as much. Can't we, I said, go with the other men and see what's waiting for us behind those Euclidian pillars?

“Doesn't it seem a bit ridiculous,” I continued, “to follow a cup?” He made some inquiries into my line of thinking, none of which proved very useful to either of us.

Well, I had to eat my words, because the cup led us to a beach on the other side of the island. We went ashore, tiptoeing past the sun—which we were surprised to find hanging in the wind—and discovered the entrance to a ladder. Naturally, we climbed the ladder, and neither Xu Fu nor I were surprised by what we found at the top.

ARIELLE

Here we go.

Say hello to—

MALLORY

Oh, my god.

ARIELLE

—Christopher.

MALLORY

Oh, my god.

CARO

A pirate.

ELIZABETH

A naked pirate.

CARO

Looks like the real thing.

ALEXANDRA

Oh, saucy, I love a theme.

MALLORY

Hot, I love a good explorer, and naked, too.

Hot!

ALANA

Take off those briefs, honey!

ELIZABETH

There's more.

ALANA

Is that such and such, the international porn star?

ARIELLE

Um–

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

Hello. I am a pirate, am I?

MALLORY

No, he's such and such, from the Italian parliament.

CARO

Look, the Surgeon General!

ALANA

So green.

MALLORY

Nervous. Come in!

ALANA

Cute.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

Hello.

I'm, um, 21.

I'm from Genoa, California.

And I sail ships.

There's definitely some layers to me.

I like to be super duper out there, but I like alone time.

I like to talk about silly stuff, but I also like to talk about empires.

I guess I'm a walking contradiction.

I like girls that are confident.

I don't think picky is the right word, but I think energies have to match, and I just haven't found my matching energy.

I've been in love where you feel this bubbly feeling, like butterflies.

That's what I'm looking for.

I've never done a dating app.

I'm trying to find someone the organic way, and the villa could be a very cool situation for that, you know what I mean?

ARIELLE

Yes.

Let's do it.

How are you feeling today?

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

I'm good.

This is cool.

You guys are all so beautiful.

This is like a dream. I feel like plasma. Is that weird? Like a plasma dream.

ARIELLE

That's normal.

So, Christopher, *Love Island* is all about finding your perfect match.

It all starts right here with a decision about who you want to couple-up with.

Who is going to be the chip to your dip?

Who is going to be the Barbie to your Ken?

Choose wisely, young grasshopper, because your decision could affect your fate on the island.

If you end up single, your place in the apple is at risk.

And you could end up being dropped.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

All right.

ARIELLE

So before you make your decision, I'm going to make it easier on you, and I'm going to find out who is attracted to you.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

Okay.

The Hermit

Ahmad Ibn Mājid tells us:

We found a hermit at the top of the ladder. She introduced herself as Jacob, and she said we had landed on the right side of the island, but God was probably out of office, or making love with . . .

She said that was all He did when He wasn't working.

"You have come to the center of the universe," she said. "But you really want to be a little off center," she said, "where things are generally warmer and more existing."

We asked Jacob if she lived forever.

We wanted to be sure we were talking to the right people.

Yes, she said, she lived forever. But, she said, the serum of sureness was always in God's hands. She was friendly. As it happened, she said we might find him in the villa dome on the other side of the island.

"Just pound on the doors," she said. "Someone will let you in."

"The serum of sureness," said Xu Fu, a little skeptical of this language.

"Yes, the serum of sureness," repeated the hermit, who had been licking her lips the whole time, presumably in need of chapstick, which neither Xu Fu nor I had thought to put in our day packs. In fact, we had only brought a few Bloody Marys, which Jacob refused, and we felt pretty chuffed that she hadn't asked for our cogs.

On our way down the ladder we took care, making sure not to trip, for the decline was steep, and hot, and fiery, and Xu Fu and I had sea legs, and it would be a shame to come to an end so close to the present.

XVIII

After lunch on the seventh day. The other side of the island.

God and Ellipsis on the balcony of her third dome, looking out across the sea, contemplating the anchored ship, the restless spume, the birds.

GOD "I see the Past, Present, and Future existing all at once before me" (Blake).

... You should give yourself a pat on the back.

GOD You're being obscure again.

... Do you think that ship is coincidental?

GOD If you're suggesting I had something to do with its arrival, I'm flattered, and confused. Ships need men.

... There are men. And women.

GOD Frenchmen?

... No, but they are very worldly. I'll introduce you.

Elli takes God to a door at the top of the dome. She opens it and they look down into the core.

GOD I love what you've done with the walls.

... Yes, beryllium.

God, eyeing the men and women down below.

GOD Why aren't they praying?

... They probably feel like time is of the essence.

GOD Judging by the way they're inspecting each other, I'd say they are preparing to populate the earth, which is especially noble, considering that they are not entirely French.

... Something for Sundays.

GOD Are those the Pilgrim Fathers?

... Good eyes!

GOD They look very bronzed, as if they have been lounging, just lounging in the sun, not doing any work at all.

... That is exactly what they've been doing.

GOD Until now.

... Now they're going to *be* a sun.

GOD I'm trying to fight the feeling that I've been used.

... Besides, the women—

GOD Here on their own accord, I hope—

... Will do anything for love.

GOD Is that what this is—love?

... There are worse ways to describe the sun.

GOD Like “hot ball of plasma?”

... Boring.

God, overcome with a sudden pang of indifference, leans inside the window.

GOD (yelling). It's lovely to finally meet you all. Unfortunately, I can't stay. But you're in good hands.

God, leaning back.

GOD Who's that down there, putting his finger up at me?

... Must be Leif Ericson.

GOD He looks awfully translucent. What happened?

. . . Time, doubts—the usual.

GOD But he's immemorial.

. . . I know.

GOD Well, I should be off. Paris.

. . . Paris.

God, descending the dome and boarding His ship.

Meanwhile, Inside the Core

Ferdinand Magellan tells us:

I didn't drink from the fountain. I had left my water testing kit in my hammock, and one can never be too sure if there's lead around, especially in the suburbs, or strange islands, where the water is often not itself, or where someone might have shaved their balls.

So when the men started moving toward the sound of the song, trudging up the beach into the gates of a dome, uninvited, perfectly trusting of their environment, I thought, *This is probably a bit odd.*

"Captain Cook," I said. "Are you excited for the transit of Venus?"

"The transit of who?" he said.

"Venus."

"Never heard of her."

"Francis Drake," I said. "I see a Spanish ship on the horizon."

"So what?" he said.

"Marco," I said. "This island is full of trees, perfect for a logging settlement, which we can grow into an empire of mills. Are you interested?"

"I love paper," he said. "But it's not for me. I'm going to invest in music. Software. Speakers. Have you ever heard such voices?"

Columbus opened the gates and skipped inside the church. Drake went next. Then Cook.

And so on.

I was last, and it wasn't until the gates shut behind me that I thought, *This probably isn't Molucca.*

My suspicions were confirmed when I tried to touch the walls, which I could see were a mix of beryllium, copper alloys, and stainless steel. I thought, *This is probably a fusion reactor.* I had read about them in magazines.

Then, voices:

"Mallory, what kind of man are you looking for?"

"Alana, how long have you been single?"

...

"Men!" I yelled. "Remember your resolve!"

"But the music!" they cried, one by one, walking further and further into the core.

"I am lost!"

"Lost in the music!"

"Totally lost!"

ARIELLE

So ladies, if Christopher is your type, please step forward.

Tough luck.

They're shy.

First boy out.

Alexandra, why didn't you step forward?

ALEXANDRA

He looks like my ex-boyfriend.

ARIELLE

Fair.

Can't argue with that.

And Caro, what about you?

CARO

You're very handsome, but a bit too shy for me.

ARIELLE

He doesn't look that shy.

Elizabeth, what about you?

ELIZABETH

He's so cute, but I don't like facial hair.

ARIELLE

So no one stepped forward, that's okay.

Because it is actually your choice—

Wait—

What's this—

FRANCIS DRAKE

Hi.

CAPTAIN COOK

Wow.

JUAN PONCE DE LEON

Hello.

Wow.

MARCO POLO

Hello.

CARO

So many pirates.

ALANA

Oh, my God.

CARO

Oh, my God.

I can't believe it.

(Stepping forward).

ARIELLE

Um–

FRANCIS DRAKE

Hello.

CARO

Hello, handsome.

ARIELLE

How are you?

MALLORY

I love your beard.

FRANCIS DRAKE

Hello.

MALLORY

My God, what a load of lookers.

ALANA

Put some clothes on! I can't take it!

(Stepping forward).

ARIELLE

This isn't right—

ALEXANDRA

You're my type, 100%.

FERDINAND MAGELLAN

Me?

ALEXANDRA

You're so hot.

FERDINAND MAGELLAN

I'm looking for Molucca.

ELIZABETH

I'm Elizabeth.

FRANCIS DRAKE

My queen!

ELIZABETH

Oh, you're handsome.

Who are you?

FERDINAND MAGELLAN

I'm Ferdinand.

ALANA

The surgeon general?

FERDINAND MAGELLAN

Call me captain.

ALANA

Oh, my god.

CARO

God, save us.

ARIELLE

Oh, my god.

GOD

...

Again

Ahmad Ibn Mājid tells us:

Yes, the domes were impressive, all three of them, but it took us a long time to figure out which one was the villa. It didn't help that each dome had about a thousand doors—doors and doors as far as the eye could see. We could have grown old knocking on all those doors, Xu Fu and me, which wouldn't have looked very good.

Luckily, Xu Fu had his ways. Of course he did. By that point, I'm not sure why I raised my eyebrows when he suggested we simply draw the domes on a piece of paper, drink our Bloody Marys, splash a few drops on the page, and go to the area with the boldest splash.

“Mary,” he said, “will guide us.”

I thought it was an okay idea.

We got a little drunk. We wondered about the silence of the sun. The smell of root. The mysterious herbs at our feet.

But before we could make our mark, we saw a man climbing down the third dome. We had never seen him before, and I guess we liked the way he moved—fast and confident, like an anchor.

“There can be no doubt,” I said, “that this vibrant man holds the serum of sureness in his hands.” Xu Fu agreed.

“Hey!” Xu Fu yelled. “God!”

“Hey!” I yelled.

But he didn't hear us. Worse, he shocked us. No sooner had he touched the ground, he was on the beach, and then he was in the water, swimming toward our ship. Watching him go, I had a strange feeling

that I was looking at our ship for the last time. Instead of saying that, I said, "His butterfly is very good."

"It looks to me," said Xu Fu, "that he's about to steal our ship, and sail away with the serum of sureness, condemning the emperor to the embarrassment of mortality, and all you can think about is his stroke?"

I told Xu Fu that butterfly is difficult to master, but he didn't care. And nor did I, really. For just then the third dome started to hum, and a song, so sweet and warm, filled our ears. We turned to face it, and while we were turning, God must have sailed away, for when we turned around later that night, still naked to the world, the sky was very bright, and our ship was gone.

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Creatures

Artist statement

A few years ago I had a vision of history's famous explorers at sea on one ship. It was perplexing. I saw Captain James Cook on the deck of the *HMS Endeavour*, about to make first European contact with the east coast of Australia. Next to him was Admiral Christopher Columbus on what he thought was the *Santa Maria*, looking for—what? He wasn't sure, but he was going West. Next to Cook and Columbus was Admiral Ferdinand Magellan, unwittingly circumnavigating the globe for the first time in search of spice for Spain. Francis Drake was on board. So too Vasco da Gama and Marco Polo. None of them could agree about where they were going, or what they had left behind, and I felt a weird affection for this clusterfuck of seafaring anachronisms.

...

I'm watching an online lecture by Dr. Gallup-Diaz, titled, "Great Voyages: Ferdinand Magellan, 'Our One True Guide': The First Circumnavigation of the Globe." The doctor talks about acts of conquest. Portuguese expansion. "A national endeavor managed by monarchies." The Americas, the pagans. Devil worship. Then, this: Magellan, he says, is

looking for cloves. Faithful to the pun, I decide that Magellan is looking for clothes. Suddenly, the men are naked.

...

It seems indulgent to try to trace the genesis of this vision, but if context is a kind of pleasure, there's no good reason to hold back. In 2018 I read an article in the *New York Times* by Christina Caron that said Italian Americans were feeling a bit miffed. Christopher Columbus, their celebrated symbol of freedom, had been recast as a bit of a murderous colonizer. That breed of colonizer is not very popular anymore, especially in public, and protestors had been visiting statues of the explorer and painting his hands red. In cities across the country, Columbus Day was being changed to Indigenous Peoples Day.

...

I'm hanging out with Rod. I met him recently at Magus in the U District when I put Dreamtigers on the counter. He'd said something nice about Borges. That was enough. We are taking the bus to Pike Place to get to Lamplight Books. He has been reading Queneau's Zazie. He mentions Oulipo. He tells me Lamplight has lots of Queneau. I pick out The Flight of Icarus and start reading it on the boardwalk. I relish the form, a novel written as a play. It's a book about writing, a parody of

writing and writers and the artifice of language. The irreverence of Queneau's voice, the puns, the deadpan scenes, stage directions, and caricatures of men—I find it irresistible.

...

Until I read the article, I didn't know that Columbus Day began as an attempt to fight Anglo American hate toward Italian immigrants at the end of the 19th century, the kind of hate that led a mob of thousands to murder 11 Italians in the streets of New Orleans. To people like Basil Russo, the president of the Order of Italian Sons and Daughters of America and who was quoted in the article, Columbus Day is not a day to honor Columbus, but "a day that's set aside to recognize and honor a monumental historic event that began the process of over 500 years of worldwide immigration to America by oppressed people seeking a better life for their families" (Caron).

...

I'm with Kyle in a small room in a dark house in the U District, sitting among a crowd of people gathered in front of two gongs. Tatsuya Nakatani, percussionist and improviser, walks in. Composer Joey Largent walks in. And there's Katrina Wolfe, a movement artist. The men stand by the gongs.

Katrina, stage right, is dressed in leaves and branches. The performance is called Dark Leaves (Dark Leaves).

Tatsuya taps his gong and the improvisation begins. A soft tremble becomes dark and wide, like a hole in the sand falling in and opening up. The air trembling, rising in pitch, Tatsuya and Joey in slow aural meet. Getting wider, the sounds—darker. Gestures turn night. Thrashing. Tatsuya at the gong like a madman. Joey beside him. Katrina convulsing, coursing stage right. Sounds verbose and vinegar, a violent mix of movement and intuition. “Artist of sound.”

Time passes and all I want is—war. I close my eyes and I see a god figure, or fissure, the artist, ancient, but a general, too, rallying his men. The gong his drum. Then, violin as Tatsuya plays it with a bow. Noise of birth. Sounds between humdrum waves and broken will. Violence. Agony. Peace. The image of Abraxas in Hesse’s Demian.

...

This tussle for the ownership of history, or the tussle for the ownership of the representation of history, which is arguably a tussle for the ownership of language, reminded me of another explorer and another holiday: Captain James Cook

and Australia Day, worlds apart except in language. Captain Cook discovered the east coast of Australia in 1770, and Australia Day marks the day the First Fleet of settlers arrived 18 years later in 1788. Today, Cook has become a symbol of Australia Day, and it's easy to see why: without his "discovery," the Fleet might never have left England. If the colonizers had been less murderous, the association might be charming.

...

I'm forgetting how it begins. Not that Foucault would care: "But historical beginnings are lowly: not in the sense of modest or discreet like the steps of a dove, but derisive and ironic, capable of undoing every infatuation" (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 143). But here I am in Ted's office, early on, telling him about the explorers in my mind, my aimless errantry through history—"errantry," that "passionate desire to go against the root" (Glissant 15).⁴ He gives me a book: language, counter-memory, practice: selected essays and interviews by Michel Foucault.

⁴ "The West, therefore, is where this movement becomes fixed and nations declare themselves in preparation for their repercussions in the world. This fixing, this declaration, this expansion, all require that the idea of the root gradually take on the intolerant sense that Deleuze and Guattari, no doubt, meant to challenge" (Glissant 14).

I'm reading the beginning of "A Preface to Transgression." Foucault talks about sexuality and the death of God, both of which live in language. God's death, he says, is not "the end of his historical reign or as the finally delivered judgment of his nonexistence, but as the now constant space of our experience" (32). Humans go on, he says, re-living God's death, "its intrinsic finitude, the limitless reign of the Limit, and the emptiness of those excesses in which it spends itself and where it is found wanting" (32). I remember that old echo of "God is dead!" and think, So is He or isn't He? The question morphs into a vision of God on an island. He is alone, an outcast, unseen.

"Maybe there has never been such an open sea" (Nietzsche 199).

...

But Australia's early colonizers, much like those who came to the Americas after Columbus blew into the Bahamas, were more than murderous. And it's no wonder gods like Cook and Columbus, and anything associated with their name and legacy of discovery, are taking a beating today. Every year, protestors will demand a change to the date of Australia Day so that it doesn't commemorate the arrival of the First Fleet.

Every year, those calls will founder on nationalist resistance, and the protestors will lean on discourse: forget *Australia Day*, they'll say, this is *Invasion Day*. As it is in the US, so it is in Australia: discourse needs a symbol, and a statue will have to be "defaced." Captain Cook is a fan favorite (See: Knaus).

...

I'm wasting time in Magus. Habit—or is it delusion—takes me to B. Barthelme, Donald. "Muse" sounds stiff, but that's what he is. I see The King and take it home and delight in this treatment of the Arthur story/stories. Arthur, Guinevere, Launcelot and co. are fighting and ruling in World War II, listening to Ezra Pound on the radio, arguing about sex and desire, lamenting the power of the modern tank, leading the charge against the Nazis before America enters the war. "You fellows," says a character, "worshipful as you may be, are anachronisms" (37).

...

When I moved to Seattle in August 2020, a global pandemic was growing up and statues were falling from their pedestals. Protests against police departments in the wake of George Floyd's murder had morphed into protests against symbols of power and white supremacy, and no president, confederate general, or explorer was safe. "From what height fallen!"

wrote Milton (5). But history is not very high. Outside the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul, the bronze statue of Columbus reached 10 feet, easy pickings for a tow-away. I watched him fall to the earth in a video, mesmerized by the cannon shot sound of bronze on concrete and the symbolism of his resting position: there he lay, kissing the earth.

...

I'm sitting at a stall on the 2nd level of Suzzallo north by the men's restroom where I hear a healthy splash of pee every 15 minutes. I thought I'd hear more. Maybe the men are dehydrated or use other rooms. Not dehydrated is the encyclopedia I have in front of me, a tome of piss, interesting piss, pissants if you're not a fan of explorers. The Encyclopedia of Exploration To 1800, edited by Raymond John Howgego.

...

A revulsion toward evil shouldn't be hard, especially when the facts of Columbus's evil are so brilliant. Behind my phone, a voyeur of historical revision, I felt like a witness to the collective justice being carried out, that tit for tat ecstasy as Columbus lost his head in Boston or sunk to the bottom of a lake in Virginia. At the same time, that article in the New York Times about the way Italian Americans viewed Columbus had complicated my revulsion. I had no sympathy for Columbus

the man, but I began to feel protective of the myriad meanings and uses of his history and uneasy at the way erasure seemed to evade those histories rather than trouble them. The symbolic appropriation of justice and power, as breathtaking as it was, felt like a quick fix.

...

I'm sitting at another stall on the 2nd level of Suzzallo, in a corner between the PG stacks and the wall of windows looking out toward the Allen part of this building. Tree branches to my left, books to my right, books with names like Kapoti Raksti by Kempe.

I'm reading the writing on the shelf of my stall, a sequence, a collaborative essay in process written by visitors here:

"Life is suffering" (in white)

Next to it, in black, "Pain is inevitable"

Next to that, in white again, "What will you suffer for?"

Next to that, "UR MOM"

Underneath all that, on the desk, "Why respect a system that lacks respect?"

To my right, "Kill me (heart sign)"

Other texts: "ANAL BEADS"

I hear the crows outside and take a photo of them. At 3:33pm a student sits on the other side of suffering.

I'm reading the tome of piss. I'm thinking I need 94 explorers for this voyage, which is the number of people Cook had on his first voyage of discovery. The key players are Columbus, Cook, Magellan, and Drake, and I will get to them soon. In the meantime I am opening pages at random. I turn the pages until a name catches my attention or the length of the entry pulls me in (the longer the juicier). I hardly know anyone. Every turn is a trip. I go from St. Malo to the St. Lawrence River and then all of a sudden I'm in Peru with Gaspar de Carvajal.

Flipping pages is a kind of somatic chance experience, or experiment. I give myself to the book, looking for explorers in the same way these explorers looked for land. The explorers are land. A teasing process. I am teasing myself, waiting to get to the main guys, letting my fingers and eyes recover the obscurer sons of empire for now.

On the 2nd floor of Suzzallo again, a habit now. I get here early enough to return to the suffering stall, retain the suffering stall, as if it's a government or a white house I don't want to share. I'm opening the book. There in the dry waves: the Pilgrim Fathers.

...

In Seattle, watching the father of Western expansion disappear across the country, I began to imagine a conversation between Columbus and Cook, who were united, in my mind, by their shared defacement. This conversation grew into a party of explorers turned outcasts arguing about their achievements and their travels, proselytizing their faiths and fortunes, and so on. Back then, I knew little about the lives of people like Marco Polo and Francis Drake, but a narrative was forming in my head, a narrative as old as literature: the voyage of discovery. Where were these men going? Again, I didn't know. But each man thought himself the rightful captain of the expedition, and each man knew where he was going. It was a daydream, but it seemed like an invitation to trouble their histories, or their ends, in language.

...

I'm reading Larry McCaffery's interview with Donald Barthelme for Partisan Review.

Larry says, Your fiction has often drawn materials from the realm of pop culture—Snow White, Batman, the Phantom of the Opera, King Kong, and so forth. What do you find useful in this kind of material?

Don says, Relatively few of my stories have to do with pop culture, a very small percentage, really. What's attractive about this kind of thing is the given—you have to do very little establishing, and can get right to the variations. The usefulness of the Snow White story is that everybody knows it, and it can be played against. The presence of the seven men made possible a 'we' narration that offered some tactical opportunities—there's a sort of generalized narrator, a group of spokesmen who could be any one of the seven. Every small change in the story is momentous when everybody knows the story backwards; possibly I wasn't as bold in making these changes as I should have been.

Christopher Columbus is my Snow White.

...

Thank god for Netflix. And thank god for living rooms. As the pandemic came back to life in October 2020, and much of the

outside world turned off, my housemate turned on Love Island. If there's a scale of trash reality TV, this is at the top. Find x number of hot men and x number of hot women, put them on an island for 8 weeks, and ask them to fall in love. The last couple standing gets \$100,000. The best part is that judgment is ingrained. Contestants choose their partners and viewers vote on who stays and who goes. A feature is the arrival of the lovers to the island. In peak heterospectacle, the women line up and talk about what they're looking for in a man. The men arrive. They pair up and fall in love.

...

I'm sitting in church. A verse from the end of Matthew 6: "Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? . . . But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Hearing this, something clicks, and I decide the explorers are, without knowing it, on their way to God, who is not dead, but held captive. I decide God is bringing them to the island, his kingdom of heaven, but he doesn't know he's doing it, either.

Am I deciding this? Or is this how it's always been?

This idea of not-knowing is central to the story.

Still in church, I decide God will be a parody of Ulysses on Calypso's island. He will be an artist, and also a general. Days ago, I had been reading about Napoleon on St. Helena, and suddenly God is wearing the emperor's clothes. He will, on top of it all, be playing the gong—badly.

But he needs a Calypso, a figure holding him captive. I don't want the name Calypso. Rolling the word in my mouth, Calypso, letting it associate, salivate. Something appears. Calypso. . . . Ellipsis. Calypso. Ellipsis. A new name birthed in the homophone of a middle syllable, "llips" and "lyps." In the beginning was the . . .

. . . language that took God.

Talk about abstractions. A metaphor and a grammatical device as a character, surely a Limitless Limit if ever there was one. The Thing keeping God captive, and which also sets him free, a la Calypso, Ellipsis, or the Ellipsis of History.

. . .

I might have gotten lost at sea, or sailed into a shitstorm of racist colonial reproduction, if it weren't for Love Island. With Columbus and Cook falling through my subconscious, and semi-naked twenty-year-olds talking about love on the screen in front of me, something clicked: the explorers were on their way to Love Island, but they didn't know it. It was the kind of mysterious, unplanned union of image, feeling, and event that transforms a daydream into an intention. Suddenly, I had a modern day Isle of Love that awaited Vasco da Gama after he reached India in the *Lusiads*. Or a modern day Tahiti, which Cook visited on his way to Australia and which 18th Century England regarded as an island paradise of free love. Only this time the island was a *real* fiction of love, existing in an unidentified present, whose inhabitants were not "uncivilized natives" but contestants on a show. It seemed like the perfect parody.

...

I'm working in the fitness center with Derek. He asks about my thesis and I tell him scientists are making suns on earth (nuclear fusion), and there's less waste than the energy that comes from nuclear fission. But it's the sun I want, and the waste. The explorers, I tell Derek, need justice. They will arrive at a modern day R'lyeh, Cthulhu's prison beneath the sea,

which is now a site of nuclear waste. Derek asks me if I've heard of "ray cats," François Bastide and Paolo Fabbri's idea for genetically engineered cats that would warn people of danger by glowing in the presence of radioactivity.

...

Turning to the present moment, reflecting on the mischiefs of eight months of reading and writing *Beginners*, I have come to think of this parody—as it now exists in a Barthesian tissue of words on paper—as an event. This comes from Alfred North Whitehead, who describes an event as a “nexus of actual occasions” (73). It comes from Gilles Deleuze, who says, after Whitehead, that “Events are produced in a chaos, in a chaotic multiplicity, but only under the condition that a sort of screen intervenes” (76). Truth be told, I’m not sure what the screen is. Deleuze calls it “a formless elastic membrane, an electromagnetic field, or the receptacle of the *Timaeus*” that “makes something issue from chaos” (76). But it’s the event I’m interested in, and the way it has, to borrow again from Whitehead and Deleuze, “become” in the chaos of a vision, a vision that “became” in my counterintuitive uneasiness toward iconoclasm. Maybe the screen is a vision.

...

Again, I'm reading . . .

“Seductresses lurked on every island” (Gillis 8).

“Utilization, (outilization), tooling of the past to serve the present, is Glissant’s work” (Wing xvii).

“There was a goat on board, which had already circumnavigated the world” (Moorehead 14).

“Odysseus–

. . . who makes his home in Ithaca . . .

I saw him once on an island, weeping live warm tears

in the nymph Calypso’s house–she holds him there by force.

He has no way to voyage home to his own native land,

no trim ships in reach, no crew to ply the oars

and send him scudding over the sea’s broad back.” (Homer 142)

“Augustine gave thanks to God, who had freed him from the sin of curiosity!” (Silverberg 13).

“All depended on the will of a God whose intentions were not only absolute but indecipherable” (Gillis 12).

*“How great are his signs and how mighty are his wonders”
(King James Bible, Dan. 4.3).*

*“Wavewhite wedded words shimmering on the dim tide”
(Joyce 9).*

“Do you know anything about your beginning?” (Melville 9).

*“So, quietly (we conceive), was commenced a voyage which,
because of its enduring influence, may be considered as not yet
having ended” (Little 67).*

And so on.

...

Whitehead says that “actual occasions,” or “actual entities,” are “the final real things of which the world is made up” (18). They are “drops of experience, complex and interdependent” (18). He says: “That the actual world is a process, and that the process is the becoming of actual entities. Thus actual entities are creatures” (22). I have filled this statement with some of the occasions that made a nexus in the chaos of my vision, and which helped move this vision into the event of the text. I

like thinking of these occasions as “drops of experience,” as “creatures” in the act of becoming. Creatures of books, performances, friendships, dates, and conversations I have experienced since September 2021, the month I began organizing the voyage.

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