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Octet

THE PROCEDURE IS ALWAYS the same. He fills in forms. He waits. After twenty or thirty minutes the first of the books arrives. Usually singly, sometimes on a trolley, until they form a tower. All morning his eyes pull in their words like a stove feeding itself. At one o'clock he goes to the canteen; by a quarter past he's back. He remains in his chair until he hears the voice of a man who is never tired, does not age, who may already be dead. It is a voice he hates. *The library will be closing in fifteen minutes*, says the man. *Please return your books to the desk*. With this the tower is destroyed. He must return to the present.

He leaves the library and walks down the hill until he reaches his street. At home he eats then tries to read but usually his eyes hurt. All he can do is walk the several blocks of the street, slowly back and forth. He goes over the day's reading. He waits for the Thought.

On this January night the sky is clear, the moon scarcely present. He is cold and his eyes ache; his mind is a tired creature he must prod into remembering. In the morning he read about Zosimos, Fulcanelli, the learned buckles of Paracelsus; in the afternoon it was Basilides and his "Octet of Subsistent Entities." Even though that was only three hours ago he remembers only *intellect*, *power*, *verbal expression*—and what else? He concentrates and conjures *wisdom*. The other four entities are gone. What use is knowing half an octet? This is the problem with reading. If you burn an entire forest then at least there's ash. But after fifty thousand words, barely a sentence remains. No wonder he feels sick each time he turns a page.

He stops to watch the car lights. To the right, a streak of white; to the left, a smear of red. This what those old prophets meant when they spoke of *heaven's trace*, *that quickened fire*, *paths that sear the air*. If Zosimos or Paracelsus could step through the centuries to stand by this road they wouldn't be impressed to see *carriages pulled by invisible horses*. Even then they knew they were surrounded by forces that could barely be sensed. Televisions, phones, and cars would not impress them either. Once the novelty passed they would see these things for what they were. *Applications but not answers to the only question*.

If only he could concentrate. What he needs is a younger mind. If he'd begun at thirty, even forty, he'd have made more progress. Instead he hid himself in rooms where words built up like smoke. Everyone talking, everyone laughing, everyone so clever. They drank and danced. They found good jobs. Some of them had children. It seemed a good compromise. Immortality was such a long shot. Instead of trying to make his entire self survive, surely it was better to settle for his nose, chin, and laugh to live on after his death. Obviously, it wouldn't be *him*. But the notion of a partial success might dispel the fear, at least until the end. After that there would be a period when his nose, chin, and laugh would move through the world. They would point to his image, speak his name, relate incidents from his life. If they made noses and chins of their own, they would tell the same stories, show the same pictures, but in one generation, perhaps two, his nose or chin would vanish, and then there would just be photos that no living person could identify. In the end it was the same outcome; the failure was only delayed.

When he reaches the park it makes its usual promises. If he follows its paths in the dark, his mental fragments will mend. This is what he did for years, until last spring when the darkness suddenly moved. The pushing hands were very small. The grass was wet and cool. He lay there till the footsteps faded. Although he couldn't stand, there was no need to call for help. He was warm and not uncomfortable and more or less resigned. Every life that ends has failed. His wouldn't be different. Say there really was a thought that makes a person live forever. Why should his mind be the first to think it?

He turns back toward home. At first, he cannot place the scream. He has to hear it again to work out that it has come from a window on the top floor of the building across the street. The voice is a young woman's, maybe a girl's, screaming the word *please*. He doesn't think they're having sex. She sounds far too scared. If she screams again he'll call the police.

He puts his hands in his pockets. Waits. Maybe it's bad that she's quiet. She could be gagged, unconscious, dead. If that's the case then all that's left is her scream in his head. *Please* he hears but very quickly the word starts to shift. Now she is screaming *peace*. That this is the fifth part of the Octet should not matter at all. He had forgotten; now he remembers. What on earth does that change?

If he were walking he wouldn't feel it. Even standing still, the sensation is slight enough to dismiss. That is what most people would do. They would think it part of digestion, something caused by gas. The event is happening deep inside him, almost at his center. It is the stage of motion before something actually moves.

Like a key being twisted too gently to persuade a lock. Nothing happens. Nothing shifts. But there is potential.

After several minutes of silence a light goes on in the window. There is just time to see a man wearing a brimmed black hat; then the curtains are drawn.

He walks on till he reaches his corner. The road he must cross to get home is closed at one end and so does not seem like a road. Hearing nothing, he steps out, and then there is confusion. A shape pushes in front of him; a green light stabs his eyes. It flashes as fast as he can blink, each pulse of light a needle.

“Fuck, I nearly killed you.”

A man’s voice. Angry but also scared.

“Look where you’re fucking going.”

“Sorry,” he says and the cyclist mutters as he smoothes away. The old man’s heart is beating like an opening and closing fist. Panicked, it wants to escape. He leans against a lamppost. He swallows and closes his eyes. Perhaps this is how he will end. Slumped in the orange pool of a streetlight, fifty yards from his house. He is carrying no form of identification. He does not have a cell phone. When the police show the neighbors his photo, they will shake their heads.

He opens his eyes. He is alive; the world is just the same. On the pavement he can see the shadows of branches shift. There is no wind, the branches are still; and yet these shadows move. They shiver in an orange light like cracks changing their minds. Obviously, he must be wrong. There must be wind he cannot feel, tree movement he cannot see; these shadows are definitely moving.

He wets his finger, holds it up. His gaze climbs the tree. After a minute of scrutiny he looks down. On the pavement the shadows still quiver.

This is not a mistake of perception. He is not dreaming, not drunk. Something impossible is happening.

The old man stands and watches till his hands are numb. He is afraid that if he looks away the impossible will stop. He has waited most of his life for something like this moment. He could not have said what he expected. Just that it should defy the way things appear. That this is the smallest of discrepancies doesn’t perturb him at all. If one impossible thing can happen, so can another.

He has three hypotheses for what is happening. The first is that the shadow is caused by a branch, just not the branch in the present. The second is that the shadow is moving on its own. The third possibility is that it is not a shadow: it could be light that is cracked.

Without warning, fanfare, or signal, the shadows cease to dance. He stares at the pavement a few more minutes, but they remain still. When he looks away and resumes walking, it is without disappointment. No audience is sorry at curtainfall if the play ends perfectly.

When he reaches his front door he is ready to go in. He is freezing and tired and tomorrow there are books to read. Witnessing a marvel is no reason to break the habit of decades. Not when he is on the right path.

His keys are in his hand; he is finding the correct one. Then he hears the eerie cry of the Siamese that lives next door. He does not know this cat, at least not very well. Something is wrong with its head or body because the former seems too large. It is a moody, unfriendly creature that avoids his hands. He knew the cat of the previous occupants considerably better. For years she was a simple, loving creature, willing to be stroked as long as any person desired. Then there was a morning when she moved slightly away. She blinked and tilted her head to one side and then it was not like being looked at by a cat. Something else was looking out from behind her eyes. Its gaze was both an assessment and a challenge. The moment did not last long. After ten seconds of scrutiny she yawned and started washing herself. At no point in the following three months was there any repetition of the incident. She was the same adoring creature she had always been. He wasn't sure what to do. He was considering whether to look inside her when she disappeared.

But this cat, the Siamese, has never seemed anything but ordinary. Even its head is not really deformed. There's no real reason it should be a certain size. Such thinking is the obstacle.

He is mildly surprised when it comes toward him, much more when it looks up and says, *Meow*. Not the sound, but the way a human says the word. Then, more typically, it slinks away to the left. When he follows, it has gone. But there is nothing magical about its disappearance: such an act is well within its ordinary powers. The important thing is that it's given him a path. Only in a fairy tale would it lead the way.

He looks both ways as he crosses the road that is not a road. On the other side he checks the pavement. As before, the shadows are utterly still, but now this is wrong. The wind is blowing faintly in the direction he's going. It makes no sense, and every sense. The explanation is simple. This is the wind that moved the branches that moved the shadows before. It is just as Zosimos said: *Resentment always lies between a cause and its effect. No sooner are the two uncoupled then they rush toward*

becoming. Both aim for the first position. Neither can give ground. And with this thought the key in his chest engages the lock. Although it is not actually turning, neither is it separate. It is like a man in a doorway, not properly inside a room, but not outside it either. A single step, a minor twist, and the line will forever be crossed.

He looks up and sees a single cloud crossing the moon. Her slim shape is both veiled and seen. He has never liked her. Proud when she waxes, calm when she wanes. In no doubt that she will return.

“Shut up,” says a woman and laughs. Neither she nor the man with his arm round her shoulders were there a moment before. They are walking so close to each other, and with such difficulty—they stagger, they weave—it almost seems as if they are wounded. They might as well be. They are fifty-five, maybe sixty; old enough to need the anesthetic of each other. He doesn’t blame them. It is an option he has often considered. He has been told that he is special, loved, by lips that were touching his ear. He has been offered a hand to hold until the very end. And of course he was tempted. He has made mistakes. He said words he didn’t mean because they fit the moment. He got married, he had a child. He was, as the Octet says, *The Parent. Also known as The Father.*

He stands aside to let the couple pass. The woman whispers something that makes the man laugh loudly. “You just wait,” he says. “I call it ‘Fucker’s Justice.’” At this she laughs, and the man does too, and this hurts the old man. Light-headed, he leans against a wall; looks up and sees the moon uncovered. Perhaps this is all her doing: the wonders he’s seen tonight could be just illusions. They might have come from dreams he has yet to have.

But even as he gasps for breath, a key within him turns. Because a word returns. *Justice, that precious thread that binds the Octet’s parts.* The thought is so vivid he closes his eyes. He feels himself moving through space. The wall is still pressing hard into his back but he is also walking forward, pushing aside the dark. He is here and also there, in the present and in the future. Everything is possible now that things are cracked. But he will have to hurry. If she can uncross a *t*, undot an *i*, all will soon be lost.

Quickly, swiftly, down the street toward the waiting park. That is the place it must happen, where it nearly happened before. *For there are many wondrous things that light cannot permit.* He must stand in its quiet and dark and listen. Now the Octet is complete, a key can fully turn.

Someone is burning herbs. The smell makes him think of shrines, temples, priests intoning ritual. So many splendid beliefs; such a history of failure. Perfume the air; erect halls of marble; such theatrics make no difference if one's thoughts are wrong.

Smoke is rising from the park. He cannot see the fire. It may have happened earlier, or perhaps not yet.

He passes through the gates then walks onto the grass. The frosted ground is luminous; his footsteps are bites. He crunches his way to the place that seems darkest and there he stands, considering the stars, while the cold unwinds his scarf, unbuttons his coat, thins the sweater and shirt beneath until he feels naked. Though he tries to concentrate, *warmth* is the thought that repeats.

When the fire appears it understandably has the quality of a mirage. At first it is only a flicker amongst the garden plots at the opposite end, but then it grows bright enough to illuminate a cluster of sheds. The fire is exactly what he wants, which makes him distrust it. He turns his back and thinks of the Octet but soon the flames can be heard. When a window cracks he turns and starts toward the sheds. As he nears the fire his whole body applauds. It has been a night of signs he cannot ignore, events that could have been singly imagined but not in combination. Marvels, wonders, talking creatures, a slippage in causality. Success has never been so close. But he has not won. He is still a flame that came out of the dark, to which he shall return.

A siren wails. A thought begins. He looks at the fire, then up at the stars. The thought is there but not its words. He feels, he knows, the key is turning. All will be unlocked.

When this happens there is pain. No, not pain; it is a sensation that needs a new category. Heat pulses in his head and heart. Already he is taller, stronger, neither tired nor cold. Something in him has changed.

The logic of the answer is simple. His death is like the wind that shook the branch and made the shadows move. It has already happened. First was his end, then his beginning; now he lives the constant middle.

Tomorrow he will not go to the library. Instead he is going to climb the highest hill in the city. The wind can blow; the shadows may move. He is the horizon.