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A Thirteenth Apostle's Star

There's no exact measure to the emptiness of the desert between one barely extant town and another. Miles open unto greater miles of flat, brown shovel-breaking earth, ringed in far off mountains, oppressed by the never-ending downward press of sky.

Yet still: there are birds, circling. There are occasional crippled trees, wicked thorns and arthritic habits, sagebrush and weeds that give nothing back to the land. There's an arrow-straight line of railroad tracks cutting from one set of mountains to another, and there's a crumbling county road (numbered, not named), and where the two meet to form an X, a Ford pickup is jammed into the side of a ten car commuter

train. Engine tipped over and derailed in the hardpan. A black plume of smoke marks where all these things meet, funneling straight into the great blue palm above.

As of yet, no one's begun to scream. The silence that followed the tearing of metal—the woofing and flaring of fuel devouring—is almost more shocking than the preceding throttle and violence. The living don't know yet if they're dead. The dead don't need to know. No one has begun yet to scream.

It's from this silence and swelling black smoke that Al emerges. Grey suit torn at the elbows, right eye blood-blind from the gash tracing his fading hairline, he holds his head to keep the whole world from spinning away. He has no idea where he is. He sees the road and he sees the rail-line but neither means a thing. But the sun is a seething smirk. The unmoving air is a smirk, but the crippled-tree shade is a kiss blown to him through the dead air, through the deathly light. Al stumbles away from the wreckage into the shade.

Somewhere far away, a sheriff's dispatcher gets a call. Someone somewhere sees smoke. Soon another call, and another: smoke in the desert. The dispatcher sends a cruiser out to investigate, though the poor kid has no idea where he's going. Head east until you see smoke. Head for the smoke. Finally, a call comes in from one of the train's passengers. Total hysterics. Insisting that everyone is dead. The dispatcher hangs up and sends out many more cars. Find the tracks. Look for smoke on the tracks. Nobody knows yet where they're going.

Before the sirens can be heard above the cries of the wounded and distressed, Al has wandered some distance from the wreck. Shambling from one pool of darkness to the next. Weaving between gray humps of sage. Stepping on tiny, tightly thorned cacti. Following the shadow-trail cast by the trees.

A quarter mile from the wreck, the trees lump into a tangled copse, invitingly dark yet taunting in density. Al pushes through the lattice of deadwood and stems, discovers the trees' bright thorns. Softly sinking in. Only resisting when he tries to pull away. When he emerges on the other side, he no longer cares about cool or darkness, only escaping the bite and sting.

It's in this state that he discovers the old woman. Hunching near her wheel-robbled caravan, kneeling in her pitiful garden. What are those horrible things, hairy-stalked and drooping heavy heads of curling, parched yellow? Sunflowers. She's kneeling among her sunflowers when he finds her. Sun shining off the fairly bald dome of her scalp. Shapeless dress like a sun-bleached curtain, almost floral, cinched around her waist with a man's leather belt.

Baring her teeth, the old woman raises one skeletal hand. Turns it at the wrist. Makes some parched and ancient sound with her throat.

Dumbstruck, Al takes his bloody hand from his head and waves back.

Once when he wasn't much younger, Al learned amazement at the swift changes a body can undergo, often in such short periods of time. How could something so helpless and small develop strong arms, a broad chest? How could blind, blinking eyes ease into seeing? The infant in the pictures could not possibly be the man he'd become. In high school, he could swim faster than any of the other boys. He could dance with girls and make them want to touch him. How could he have once been something else?

Yet even after all possible advantages had been attained, the body continued to change. His hair began to fall out. His waist took on a shape that made his legs somehow bird-like and gawky in comparison. The flesh of his neck thickened in unintended ways. There was nothing he could do about any of this. He could still make women want to touch him, and the women did touch him still, but they were changed, too. It depressed him to realize that he and everyone was helpless and had been from the start. And if he could look at his own life as a series of incomprehensible and uncontrolled physical changes leading to his disappointing yet still capable middle-age, then what must this old woman feel as she rises and strides like some paralytic stork out from the dead or dying sunflowers and through the weeds to him, where her withered bone-trap hand takes his spotty and blood-smeared hand, where her myopic eyes squint at his bleeding brow as she asks him if he has something to do with that train wreck back over there?

Glancing over his shoulder, Al watches the black smoke billow and plume into the vapid blue. Blinks as the black expands, as the blue ex-

pands. Finally turns away.

“What train wreck?”

“Do you think he knew what he was doing?”
“I don’t think he knew much of anything.”

Calmly the father helps his teenage daughter out their train-car’s window. Behind her, a pack of bodies waits to get out. But they’re going to have to fend for themselves.

“I mean, maybe he thought he could beat the train.” The language spoken between father and daughter is not the language of the other people on the train. “You know? Maybe get across the tracks before we did.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Taking his daughter’s hand, the father leads her running to the shade of a nearby tree. “Or maybe he was drunk or on drugs or asleep.”

“Maybe,” she says as behind them, the first of countless strangers falls out of the window, landing badly on his shoulder, crying out among the other cries. “I guess he could have been asleep.” Neither father nor daughter turns back.

The old woman’s voice is high and reedy and incredibly dry sounding, like two dead trees leaning against one another, groaning in night wind. Looking out toward the horizon, Al sees the entire world glimmering through a hazy screen. Shimmering sunflowers. Shimmering mountains. No matter how he tries, he cannot understand what she says. Finally, she tips her hand toward her mouth, and he gets it.

“Yes. A drink. Wonderful. Please. God bless you. God.”

The first responders are not the first to respond. A miniscule stream of traffic backs up on either side of the wreck. Some people wait in their cars. Because there’s air conditioning there, and satellite radio, too. A few get out to look, standing on the roadside, leaning at the waist as they stare. As if bending forward might give them a better view. After some time, a broken voice rises through a shattered window—

“Are you doing anything?”

—and given no other choice, the observers become involved. First a farmer and his young grandson. Then a truck driver on his way from Missoula to Sacramento. Yet even these people hesitate in their steps as alone with her two sleeping children in a sleek and spacious hatchback, a cow-eyed mother gradually comes to the conclusion that maybe the police should be involved. She finds her phone and dials 911. Plainly states where she is and what she sees. And now the dispatcher knows where all the cops and EMTs scattered seekingly throughout the desert should now, finally, be sent.

“**W**hat’s your name, son?”
“Name?”

Somehow, now—finally—he can understand her, her withered mouth-sounds finally resolving into words. On paint-flaking chairs around a paint-flaking table, they’re sitting in the caravan’s shade, beneath the limp boughs of a tree. Leaves like long tickling fingers. Barely swaying. Al can’t remember how he got here from the garden. Like time remained constant while space folded, erasing the gap between here and there. But wasn’t that in a children’s book?

“You know. What your mother called you.”

Awfully technical for a children’s book. On the small table between them, a glass sweats coolly between his hands, riding in a small pool of its own creation. He wipes a fingerful of moisture from the glass and rubs it into his eyes.

“Honestly, ma’am, I don’t rightly recall at the moment.”

“Then you shall be Laban.” And she smiles. “You present yourself like a Laban.”

“Great.” Al sips and deduces his drink to be ice afloat in some sort of bourbon. On the table before the woman rests a can densely scripted in medical jargon. “Thank you.” Unopened. “You going to join me? Or am I drinking by myself out here?” Somehow, the words feel familiar and welcome on his tongue, like some holiday ritual repeated many times before.

Rearranging the lines of her face into some deathly sort of web, the old woman grins and checks her watch. “Give me ten minutes, okay?”

From far away, maybe one or both of them hears someone scream.

At the very rear of the train, there's a certain question among the passengers about what, exactly, is going on. Not long ago, they were drifting like fired bullets through the world. Now they're stopped. This is all they know. From their angle, they cannot see the smoke of the flaming pickup or the engine overturned on the ground. Large rocks block their view, and hunchback trees. Throughout the final car, there are whispered conversations as to what, if anything, they or someone else should do. The air conditioning has stalled along with their forward progress, and the automatic doors between cars have sealed shut. Something, obviously, must be done. People groan and throw their hands, wipe the sweat from their brows while near the back of the car, a couple in their mid-forties—a used car salesman and the secretary to a used car salesman (a friendly competitor at the lot up the street)—quietly argue. She thinks that, if he gets off the train, they'll begin moving again and he'll be left behind. He's convinced (rightly, though for the wrong reasons) that this will not happen. They're each trying to use the narrow armrest between them. Neither seems to think that the other is sharing enough.

"Trust me, babe," smiling, he leans in to kiss her cheek. "It's going to be fine." And in the moment when their two fleshies touch, the salesman's wife hopes he's wrong. She hopes the train will pull away and leave him out here. She hopes the sun mercilessly cooks him into a pretentious, condescending cinder.

Pulling the emergency latch and slipping out through the opened window (it's not as easy as he thinks it should be), the secretary's husband starts to walk alongside the train, trying to match his step to the creosote-soaked ties. But his stride is unnatural and awkward. And above the scent of the sun-hot ties, something bad hangs in the air. And in the passing windows, pale faces look out at him, imploring, needing. So he jogs down the talus embankment, away from the tracks and into the hardpan and weeds. And now he sees the black finger of smoke accusing the open sky. And just past these hunchback trees bowing like leprous beggars, he can see the tipped engine and see the burning truck.

The secretary's husband likes to brag about his time in the service. He thinks this will endear his customers to him and maybe solidify a sale. But he was only ever a weekend reservist. Our war then was cold

and if our enemy had ever struck, we'd all have died all at once anyway: the battle would have been everywhere in a sterilizing flash, then just as quickly, not been anywhere. The only mortal combat in which he ever engaged was with a thirty-pack in the back of a troop carrier, roving the peripheries of the SAC base in the ink and blotter mist before dawn. Nothing he'd done or claimed to know has prepared him for the flames and torn metal, the crying figures dragging themselves out of broken windows, the still bodies spread out on the ground. He stands and watches while his insides turn into a cold and syrupy fluid. Then he rushes back to his wife. It's imperative: he must return to his wife.

Before the flames boiled to peel its paint away, the pickup was a pale baby blue. Fenders rusted to a coxcomb orange. A red and black NRA decal crooked in the rear window. The train an industrial gray with a blue stripe running its length. The windows all tinted black.

Cracked desert clay the same faded ochre as a desiccated orange rind. Baked beyond life in the sun. The sagebrush is gray. The leaves of the trackside trees all silvery green.

The tracks are gunmetal black, the ties a deep tar-stained brown. The smoke is an opaque ashy smudge.

And amid the dead gray weeds and deadly graying sunflowers, the caravan is a washed out red and gold. The windows are aged with fly-shit and dust. Over the door, a punched tin star hangs by an eight-penny nail.

And the old woman's skin is a burnt and leathery red. Wisps of hair fishing-line white. Her eyes a clear piercing blue. From her neck by a shining gold chain, an ornate crucifix is poised and for Al—all pale skin and blonde hair and torn up slate-gray seersucker—this last detail is a strange revelation. He had not noticed the cross before. The colors of the world come together into a broken vision of dirty stained glass, Dead Sea lost, and at its center, a golden dead man hangs in suspended tribulation from a polished golden cross.

Al sips amber off the melting ice in his glass. The old woman checks the black ticking hands of her watch, and sighs.

Back before his body continued past the apex of its progression, Al spent a summer on a recently abandoned farm. The sun-

stained shapes of missing pictures burned in the wallpaper. Clothes still scattered in drawers, on the floor. The water and electric still ran, at least at first, and the fields were still orderly yet totally gone to seed, an occasional stray and lost-eyed cow wandering through. It was the summer between semesters and he lived in a ghost farm with a woman whose body was a candle flame eating up the wick of his heart. Did he meet her here in this big empty place? Did she follow him here from school? Perhaps he was the one who followed her. They spent their days reading books in the sun, in the wind, on the porch or in the soft susurrus of bending wild grass. He remembers the sound of her laughter as her body opened like praying hands. He remembers a wind-chime on the corner of the porch. Tolling three notes like the suggestion of a beginning or end. Tolling one note three times. Tolling one note just once.

But really what he remembers is the night they pushed a mattress out of the extra bedroom's second story window. How it bounced and cartwheeled across the yard. It was the longest day of the year, or, anyway, the latest the sun would set. They dragged the mattress into the tall grass and spread out a soft moth-holed quilt over top. The nodding wheat heads formed a frame above them: in all the world, there was only the mattress and the grass and the box of sky overhead, slowly turning from deep pink to purple to black, filling impossibly with an unending wash of stars, brightly winking planets, an eventual god-like slice of sterling, blinding moon. There was nothing else in the whole world. Not even the two of them, watching. Least of all the two of them.

Whatever happened to that girl, he wonders now in the shade beside the caravan. He can't even recall her face, just her long blonde hair, the arc of her hips, her voice like the first sip of cold beer on a hot night. He wonders if maybe he married her or if maybe she got away. He looks at his hand for evidence of a ring—a faint indentation, a discolored band—but the blood he now wears obscures whatever proof he might seek.

For a moment, he wonders where the blood came from. Then: he remembers. Somewhere far behind him, a siren faintly sounds. Watching him observe his own hands, the old woman smiles silently to herself, then after a moment digs around inside her dress to produce a leather-bound book, deep red and no bigger than a cigarette pack, creased and worn as if by centuries of earth-dirty callused hands.

“Let me read to you something, Laban,” she says, thumbing through the nearly translucent pages. “I think to you this might somehow apply.”

The sight and sound of the open book fills Al with a sick sense of unease, like a snake all curled up in the dank cave of his belly. Ready to unfurl.

And she reads:

After these things, the Autogenes said, “Let the twelve angels come into being so that they might rule over the chaos and the oblivion.” And behold an angel appeared from the cloud whose face was pouring forth fire, while his likeness was defiled with blood. And he had one name, “Nebro,” which is interpreted as “apostate,” but some others call him “Ialdabaoth”... Nebro then created six angels to attend him. And these produced twelve angels in the heavens, and each of them received an allotted portion of the heavens. And the twelve rulers, along with the twelve angels said, “Let each one of you...”

“But the rest of the scripture,” she says, pausing to clear her throat, “is lost.”

“Well,” Al says, “isn’t that something?” But this idea—angels creating angels to give shape and dominion to and over the earth and heaven—does not click with Al’s understanding of the world. For there are beautiful coastal mountains plunging headlong into the sea. There are towering trees and hills teeming with life. Birds in the sky and fish in the rivers. Everywhere all at once. Yet there’s also this: an empty dead expanse of nothing at the center of the world. Every inch identical to the inch before and after. The whole middle of the country, he knows, is like this: unshaped and unformed, a flat and undifferentiated plain. Just like Russia. Just like Australia. Where is there any evidence to prove that God did not simply give up? An entire infinite system of burning gases spinning around burning gases, and our tiny blue planet enthroned

with the universe revolving worshipfully around it. But God gave up. Moved the center somewhere else. Left His failure behind. For every ounce of His divine soul He poured into our creation—every mountain and every forest, each tree and antelope and butterfly and monkey—every last detail His attempt at perfection, and each one a monument to failure. The overspecialization of the giraffe and koala or any other marsupial. The obscene vulnerability of the manatee and every human male’s exposed and flaccid genitals. Unable to make real what His mind envisioned, the Great and Unknowable Failure turned away from His unfinished and dismal masterwork, abandoning His failed creations to cope in their failed, imperfect home.

The old woman closes her book and grins “So many busy hands!” and laughs, a singularly horrible sound.

When the police and ambulances and fire trucks finally arrive, the evacuation is already well underway. Once the shock of having survived set in, people began leaking out of the wreck, automatically knowing only to save themselves. When the secretary’s husband returned from his scouting, the other passengers in the rearmost car—rattled but generally unscathed—poured out the windows, kicked open the emergency exits, rushed to the front to help the other survivors free. Now, near the front, where the flames of impact are spreading—eager and fierce as cannibals to consume—an elderly man cradles the ruined body of his wife of fifty-three years. They were enjoying a late morning bagel with cream cheese, some coffee. Then the engine tipped over and she was dashed into their café car table. Now her body’s like a limp sack holding the splintered dust of her bones. He presses her bloodied brow to his mouth, to his cheek, holds what’s left of her close. The flames dance and lick around him and someone shouts through an open door for him to move, c’mon, let’s go. But eventually, the shouting stops. The old man closes his eyes and waits for his chance to let go while outside, a pregnant woman in a pretty blue dress squats down with her back against a stone and wails into the dead air, hugging her belly above the blood staining the ground beneath her. Children wander and cry out to their parents who may or may not hear or respond. Men and women seek out their partners, their children, their friends. Red Cross volunteers hand out blankets, uselessly. A helicopter arrives and dumps a

spray of retardant chemicals on everyone. And in his pickup, the man responsible for all of this curls more tightly around the steering wheel, blackened and growing blacker. Somehow all of this Al knows without seeing. The fluid through which all light must pass. In the superheated sky, the rising plume finally succeeds in eclipsing the sun, leaving the survivors to toil in the apocalyptic shade while a quarter-mile away—in a waste of sunflowers and locusts and olives, at the very end of the line—Al finishes his drink as the old woman slowly unbuttons her shirt to reveal a plastic tube and funnel stretching out from a bandage on her softly distended belly. Breasts like deflated honeydew. Funnel and tube cloud-stained dirty with use. Opening the can on the table before her with one long and yellowed fingernail, the old woman holds it up with her pinky daintily jutting—

“Bless this bounty.”

—and pours her breakfast directly inside. And for a moment, Al has to wonder—in the absence of all other knowledge, his family and past, his own pitiful and meaningless name—if maybe he’s the man inside the burning pickup, hands clutching tight the mechanism of his mistake as his eyes melt out from the grottoes of his skull, as his mouth falls open to shatter and split like driftwood, like glass, as the flames lovingly lick as the most delicate lover the ringed knuckles of his spine.

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