

Gratitude

by [Andrew Jankowski](#) (July 2018)



Title Unknown, Albert Marquet

On the road to K-, a riot of sound on the ears of the man with the small case and the long coat. A pause when he strains, and again the sound. Bats? Birds lifting and rope grappling for its place against something hard—a tree, a branch creaking, cracking; a low moan and the shuffling of hands.

Almost bringing his case, he does not, not so much deciding as being unable in the onrush of forward movement—frantic, splintered in thought, but direct and to the purpose in action, he runs toward the sound.

The tree has cracked, but the branch is not broken. His toes stabilize him. Running now frantic, but with no motion wasted, this other produces a knife from his coat pocket, begins to hack at the thick rope just above the man's head. Strand by strand breaking, until it spins and splits and one end comes away in the tearing.

"Can you breathe? Can you—"

His choking is louder, turns to coughing, then hoarse breath and waiting. He does not make eye contact. The man in the coat waits; the dust-covered man with the noose around his neck waits too. All is quiet but the birds singing.

The fire pops now in the near-darkness. Both men are silent. Two logs are added by the saved man, but his eyes keep to the ground, hoping to hide. Hoping, not to conceal what has already been seen, but wishing to make the shared knowledge less consequential; he does what he ought not to do, hiding. Hiding and cannot hide, so he flushes and wishes his hiding to seem modest. It does not.

Now that he sees himself and knows himself seen, from without, the message sent: seem not to be hiding; hide by not hiding. But his eyes will not, and his head stays down, looking at the dirt and the fire. *Lift your eyes and look at this man. There*

is no thing done that cannot be undone, and the night is coming, and the minutes when this night will come and hide you again. Let it come, brave the last remaining moments before your relief comes, and then you will sleep. Soon you will say no more and lay and look at the stars, and you will forget him and know no more the ache that he has come, when you wanted him to come. Praying as you stood there, your feet on that log. Standing on that old trunk in the dust and waiting. Praying that he would come in time.

He is kind by not speaking to you now, though it is morning. He lets you hide, defying expectation. How long was he awake while your dream bled into the world and your voice seeped out unknown to you? What does he think he knows of these samenesses, that he does know in some form? It is less so, or more so, whatever you do, and in trying you anticipate another's trying, and their eyes are immaterial. Their eyes are immaterial because if you see your own, you see another's too – and no eyes take in what is there in each. If he is one who knows his own, then he knows mine too. If he does not, there is no fear of seeing or being seen, or talk of knowledge or vision. What can he know that does not admit his own?

The sun is a sharpness and a piercing. I must go to town. This was a warning and I will speak myself to another and leave this out here in the dust without me. Him without me. He asked so few questions. So that I slept the night through aware of him and unharmed by his need to know. He that came when I asked for one to come; he asks no questions even now.

The man was saved and now walks the road, watching himself walking, drawing a scene that cannot carry its weight but insists. Praying that he would come with his feet on the log, but not wanting it. Because there is an end to all of these things and what we cannot choose we cannot know. Nothing known but watching it come upon us; then the waiting for it to go.

Praying that he would come with his feet on the log, but not wanting it: wanting now merely relief, and not trusting that it would come. Trusting that its coming could be no choice. That the choice is not a man's to make. Which way to be clear of it? No choice. None.

And yet, to speak its name—I say I do not choose it, but I choose. It comes upon me, but I choose.

I cannot go to town, but even if I go, I will go for no reason, telling nothing even if I speak; my confession need not be in town, need not be. I confess it all, freely. And what does that get me?

But I can try again if the choice is mine, can hold that possibility close to me. Did I want an end in the first place? Or did I want him to come? Let it be; I will go to town and confess, what comes then comes then.

The man was saved and now he walks through the trees and under them. Along the boulevard he walks and toward the high street where the sounds come. Eyes front, head straight; he walks under the low hanging trees and scrapes against the branches, walking through the town.

Every time I start fresh, seeking to be fresh, and begin again, a clearing is made and I begin to walk through it. And as I walk, every time I walk, there is a moment that believes, and so I begin to believe. In the knowing there is belief of another kind, but first there is simply belief, and I begin with this. But steps are taken and they lead me from simple belief to belief in what I might find. But I look toward what I might find, and there is a softness, and a satisfaction there. There, ahead, and I may almost reach it, so that now, already, I feel the satisfaction, stupidly, and without cause. Feel the satisfaction and think not of the longing, there as I repeat myself, dumbly, and with little else to sustain me.

Already there is something too satisfying, almost sickly-sweet; becomes self-defeating. And how easily is this seen through. And then how far am I from the place where I might find a clearing again, how absurd and how funny to think of making a new start.

But to share this abomination: to cast outside of me what I have earned myself. *To be forgiven.* To arrive at a moment of calm clarity: another safe stand from which to project rebuttals, or make new resolutions.

Later I will say this thing, and he will be kind. But he will not have to follow in my heart as I sit with myself, knowing the blackness. He can be kind, as a matter of seeming, because while I am with him there is nothing but seeming at stake. How vile, then, to make assurances. To send me on my way, cheerily, happy that the worst is over: *happy for me!* Where there is no hiding, and the edges pierce and the sight of the others is terrible; where the choices take on their true meaning – there he cannot come, and there he does not wish to be. And the other, who came and remained with me through the night, was he an extension of this talker or of my own?

Enough. Did I pray for him to come, or did I hear him coming? One answer is desperation, the other stagecraft, a show I played and enjoyed. Did I want to begin again, or is the import of these theatrics darker and less worthy of forgiveness: *did I merely wish to become pleased with myself through the machinations of unfelt despair?*

Reflecting, after his act of grace, the other:

“Having seen such men, I know the poison of that fear, that desperate, intense focus on life, so much focus that it cannot be lived. Over-scrutinizing, compelling actions impossible in any natural run of time, chilling basic impulses down to inert shame, and so filling the days. Clinging so desperately to life that it cannot be lived.

No man can carry such weight.”

He walks easily as he thinks, and he takes in the sights as breath is taken in the lungs.

“I feel the terrors, the darkness of the night, but days pass and still they are here and I am here with them, and God has taught me to bear them. With his gift of patience, I bear them.

But I cannot show another what he has shown me, and his existence remains a mystery to him, though he is conscious that it has been seen.”

Walking slowly, but steadily covering his ground, he takes in the trees even as he is thinking, so that the image and the thought form a whole, inseparable in tone and seemingly in import. The last streaks of green are paler, and yet brighter, as if calling us to pause and love the silence of the cold, the difference in the autumn air. They stand out clearly from the soft light, from the near gray sky, standing next to the deep red of the maple. Peace, true peace in the silence of the changing trees, just steps off of the high road as raindrops begin to fall.

“That is sure to torture him: that he has been *seen*. That his most private shame, and the remedy he was seeking but also hiding from – for he cried out, did he not? What else was it that attracted my attention there? That his most private shame should have been grasped by another, the pure torture of it escaping him, that it has seeped out into the world and ceased to obey him in its hiddenness...”

Walking slowly, he considers what has come to him. Soon after, he stops to eat, taking out his canteen and his bread, and enjoying this brief rest.

Pacing the aisles of the deserted church in the sweet half-light of a late October afternoon, as it passes through the stained glass and softens still further the life inside the walls, the priest grips the top of each pew as he passes them.

“That he would make so much of his having been overheard—a dim light in a vast wilderness is a sound such as he made: what could this other man know? What can he now know of him, having heard only that much? And is he not entitled to some knowledge, having saved him? But gratitude is a small thing if it does not bring understanding. A man needs to feel that his actions have purpose. And what, will he imagine that he has only postponed what he still cannot understand?”

Overhearing, on the other hand, a prayer: I know I am meant to guide them and take their hand and help them find the words. But there are some who can only pray when totally, desperately alone. Only then does the sound come, and the right words.”

Many desperate seconds does that last thought resound in the priest’s mind as he paces.

“Well, and why not that? Such an act is a prayer, a cry for help out of unmixed desperation. I should have shown more sympathy. Of course it is terrible to be overheard. I myself, sometimes, cannot truly pray unless I am alone. I know this and yet I lecture him in his now silent but still seething desperation. I know it and still I wrong him with my arrogance. Submit, I say to him, with other words; submit and there will be peace in your heart. I have believed a stock phrase even when confronted with the truth of a man’s heart. How could he have stayed when I begged him?”

Outside, the clouds seem to congeal and the soft light dies down as the rain begins to fall. There is no sound appreciable when the leaves are pulled by the weight of the rain, but we imagine a dull scraping. Is there such a sound?

Tramps on the high road, where the water cannot come and even the mud runs in a track; something gives him away, identifies him as other than them, though their clothes and their posture is identical. He knows it and feels it on his neck and he chooses to ease himself over the muddy edge and slide down in the dirt and filth and escape from just their eyes, lifted too long and lingering on him, so that he feels them until he is below the road and into the ditch with the slick leaves and the still flowing rain as its dregs drip from the branches and pull more leaves down. Down there with the fallen leaves he stands still and waits for them to pass, trusting their interest to be less than his shame; a safe bet, and one he has grown accustomed to. Here in the silent darkness does he wish to be, wishing to stay.

The peace of hiding, of the hidden thing, totally silent; small and silent in the night, while the wind grows fierce and the rain falls again fiercely too, and the noise is a kind of comfort as is the cold. The cold and silent night, safe from the road and the obsession in his breast, momentarily weak, blissfully weak, he leans against a tree, covers his head with his cloak and sleeps the whole night through.

Pacing still in the darkness, as the candles die out, the priest again, relentless in his mercy:

“Most men can forgive themselves, and take back into themselves somehow all that has been expended, and tighten into a ball, and become strong. Those who cannot merely cannot, and no word of kindness—surely not that—can show them how.

If he comes back, I will be gentle with him, for the momentary peace it will bring. But only that.”

On the road to K—, a silence and a sleep that blankets the hillside. The sun gives light, but blinds; the dust sits shapeless; and on these blind hillsides repose hangs like a promise of disaster. Which men seek the noose and which to cut

it? The heat swells and then drops to a blandness as a few lone figures pace the roadside. The rope has been taken from the broken branch and this branch now lies obscured in the dust and the debris, nearly indistinguishable from twigs and branches downed in a wind or merely felled in the runnel of time. Men who would act for either cause move past the sight, knowing nothing of it.

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