

The Lake

The rain fell. It was a light and steady shower. It had been raining at a nearly constant pace for three weeks. Parts of the Alvin River swelled past the banks. Several roads were closed as the river cut the county in two. People still made it to work, but at a much slower pace. There were only two main points where one could cross the Alvin to get the other side. I was at one of these crossings. Water rose to the point where it threatened to take over this low bridge. If this closed, there would be only one remaining road linking the eastern half of the county with the west. I wasn't worried about missing work, only that I may be late. Once again, I calculated my arrival time. Each time, the result gave me the bad news. My head rang with numbers, travel velocities, number of stops and the probabilities of red lights versus green. I tried again, each time skewing the numbers on the side of hope, but they were not enough to create a favorable outcome. My arrival time kept slipping at each light. To the front and the back of my vehicle, I was surrounded by morning travelers. I was a part of the giant iron snake.

Traffic was stop and go. On a good stretch, I managed five to ten miles per hour. I stopped yet again. The rain played a rhythmic tattoo on the windshield. I tilted my head, listening. There was music in it. Feeling overly poetic, I mused on the song. I got the feeling of numbers, as if it contained mathematic equations. It was as if the rain were trying to assist me with my calculations. 7:34 AM. Twenty six minutes. Three more lights and one long lane merge remaining. Four times three plus seven. Add remaining standard travel time. Nineteen plus five, would make it with a minute to spare. I waited for traffic to move. Other drivers either stared straight ahead or fidgeted with various things in their cars. Nobody looked at me. The only thing paying attention to me was the rain. Commanding my attention, it sang numbers. It was musical. I heard lonely songs combined with a sad history. It wanted to tell me its secrets. Laughing to myself, I realized how ridiculous one can be when alone in the car. Singing, sentient rain. I caught another driver looking in my direction. I nodded and smiled. The driver just stared then resumed applying her make up.

Traffic moved again. I resumed my trek. A cargo van cut me off. I sounded my horn, but the driver didn't hear or even seem to notice me. As I approached my place of employment, the smell of the lake became stronger. It saturated the area during the rains. The past week the smell was overpowering. Its strength increased every day. The rain fed it and nurtured it as if it were a living entity. It would surely die had the good old sun come out to visit. The wet, mossy, green, fish smell made me wrinkle my nose. I hoped there would be an end to the rain soon.

I made it with a few minutes to spare. I nodded to the gate guard, but he just ignored me. In the parking lot, I heard faint drums. They pounded in the distance. I recall they started several weeks ago, about the time the rains came. They would play all day as I worked. Maybe they belonged to a group of children at a summer camp? There was a local college a few blocks from the great lake. It was possible, it was a music class. Whoever pounded the drums, they knew the music of the rain. They told the same stories, sang the same songs, and solved the same math equations. I got it into my head to find out just who was drumming these past weeks. It was all consuming. I had to know the answer to this riddle. The gate guard was the only one who I've encountered and he barely noticed me. I skipped work for the day in favor of

solving this mystery.

It was as if the drums had a consciousness. They knew I resolved to root them out. They teased me. Instead of one directional source, there were many. It sounded like they came from everywhere at once. Why would they call out to me only to hide? Is this a terrible joke, a game? This went on for a few blocks of circling around. As I moved closer to the great lake, they relented. There was only one focused source; the lake. Pedestrians gave me a wide berth, but refused to return my pleasantries. A young mom was walking with her child. She held him by the hand. I nodded tipping my hat as they approached. She only shivered and pulled the boy closer. The drums were softer now, and more focused. They were very easy to follow. I was led to the marina. It was full as the rains were constant. Nobody wanted to go out on the water. It was filled with various personal craft, and some more luxurious models. My jaunt was accompanied by a light drizzle. It seemed our town would never again see another dry, sunny day. The boats rocked on the water. It was a gentle surface. The patter of raindrops peppered the lake. It would've been pleasant had it not been for the terrible smell. That rotted fishy smell was much stronger here.

I walked out onto the long cement pier. It was in a terrible state of decline with crumbled sections in many places. The city claimed it was to be repaired this year. The Army Corp. of Engineers would be assigned to the job. For now, it was a risky affair. Parts of the pier had more solid footing than other places. I could see where the cement broke away and a small boulder that was once part this walkway was just below the surface. It was now a part of the other boulders under the marina. I was soaked, and cold to the bone. I should be uncomfortable, yet I felt relaxed. I had the same feeling one would on a beautiful sunny day. The cold drops were akin to the warm sunshine on my skin. I stopped walking for a bit to take it all in. Several hundred yards behind me was the shoreline.

A few hundred ahead was the end of the pier, and my destination. It was a small lighthouse. It wasn't the romantic things one would see on a postcard, shining for miles on the north east coast. No. This was a little structure stuck to the end of the pier. The lighthouse was a squat thing painted in orange and white. It served the marina and those coming and going. It was littered with graffiti declaring who loves who, and who is the greatest man ever. Small profound poems were left on the walls. I looked them over. Most were uplifting pieces inviting the community to love each other. It was a rough town. These were encouraging. It was strange that there were mainly positive messages scrawled across it. There was little to no profanity. It was as if this was a conscious act to ward off something. There was one poem I could not decipher. It was a strange contribution to the rest.

For the wind is your voice

It calls to me

oh yeh-keil

Oh the stars are your path

I come to you

oh yeh-keil yeh

Your orb laid bare

oh yeh-keil yeh barum

Carum oh Carum ho! Your wonders abound

oh yeh-keil yeh barum no Carum

*The orb shines
oh Marduk
Marduk protect me!*

I studied this last one. It made no sense to me. I read the strange words in my head. Trying to digest and understand it, I read them several more times. Something unhinged in my head. I had the most wondrous feeling. Small aches or pain my body accumulated over the years were gone. I was on a cloud, numb to the rain and the cold. I was full of quiet energy. The words insisted. They wanted to be read over and again. I obliged. I couldn't resist them. My head floated gently on my shoulders. It wanted to separate and fly away. I read the words again. This time, out loud. The drums in the rain grew louder as each syllable was spoken until the last line I was made nearly deaf.

Then it all stopped. The drums were still. I turned slowly around at the end of the pier. The world was in stasis. Raindrops hung in the air, in front of me. I pushed water out of my way as I explored. Each drop no longer part of a song. No more mathematical equations broadcast to me through the music of the rain. I smiled. This was the perfect feeling. I looked into the water. I saw a small school of fish frozen. Something caught my attention. A thing moved there just under the water. Many things moved.

They walked on the bottom as they approached the pier. Their form was incomplete. They appeared as men. They also held the form of fish. There was an inbetweeness about them that suggested they were much more than that. Their form was fluid. They stretched and contracted with the appearance of an oil slick. Each of them lost form then coalesced into a protean shape then back again. The only steady anchor in their rhythm was their eyes. I could see them burning into me from under the lake. They were terrible and ancient eyes. Their story was laid bare as they approached. They wanted to be read. Their eyes told me of things to come and things past. I was held in place as the others approached. I saw pieces of Earth's history. Pieces that they wanted to show me. Images of these others mingling with prehistoric man filled me with a curious dread. How old is this race of strangers? How strange can they be if we've cohabitated with them during our existence? They showed me multiple futures. Various possibilities that will happen or could happen. The possibilities ranged from the glorious such as Man colonizing the stars, to the pitiful as Man collapses on itself and loses purchase on this Earth.

Two of the ambassadors surfaced. The rest remained below. I lowered myself into the shallow water at the edge of the pier. They held my gaze for a while completing their stories of days past and times to come. Their eyes were awful. They were also intense. Full of fierce intelligence, they were desperate that I join them. They had things to show me if I'd only follow. The numb happy feeling intensified. I floated on a cloud. All anxieties I didn't know I possessed melted away. One of the ambassador's eyes had a sadness to it that I didn't notice before. The pair turned and re-entered the lake joining their brothers who waited below. I followed.

The water was cold. I registered the temperature, but it had no effect upon me. I did not shiver. I was happy. I stepped forward as the water rose quickly. Soon the water passed over my face then the top of my head. I took a breath prior on reflex, but knew that I didn't need it. I was at home here. The three of us walked further to join the group. The surface moved further away from us as we traveled along the bottom. There was a trail here. At periodic intervals, around every fifty meters, a small statue lined one side or the other of the

path. Each were unique, but held similar qualities. All were cylindrical and made of some beautiful green rock. They were representations of men and creatures. Legs, arms, and other limbs folded just so in order to fit the form. It was only my imagination, but they were looking at me. Man and beast alike judged me from their stone homes. My euphoria held. All anxiety was bled away the moment I finished reciting that strange poem. They weren't frightening, though they probably should be. I felt sorry for them. My empathy for them suggested they live and were not happy in their situation. Yet they still judged. Was I worthy to walk among these ambassadors of the great lake?

We walked deeper into the dark. The statues shone with a dim phosphorescent light. They guided our group along the path as we journeyed ever deeper. We must have been a dozen miles from the shore and that squat lighthouse. We walked most of the day. It was difficult to determine the time as the sun was no longer available. We passed a minor shipwreck along the way. It was home to the local creatures. The path rose and sank, twisted and turned much like a trail on land. We entered a small valley. The ambassadors, who have ignored me most of the trip, stopped and turned. One approached me then gestured toward the far end of the valley. His eyes were terrible. Gold rimmed and jagged were his irises. The pupils were round but not without a hint of animal to them. They were deep. I felt I could fall into them and travel longer than I have in my entire lifetime. They were void. The entire group caught up and gathered around. Several joined the first in the gesture. It was clear. This was the end of the line. They would not go any farther, but I was to continue. Towards what? How could my guides leave me? I found I had no idea why I was here only that I wanted to see more. I had to know what these beings were and what else was down there. Was that my purpose? Curiosity would have to do. I nodded to them and continued. Several dozen paces in, I slowed and turned. They were still there where I left them, watching. One by one, they slowly turned away and left. The last one remained to watch me leave.

The valley was long. I believe I had traveled a few hours since the ambassadors parted ways. I was not tired. I was not hungry nor thirsty. The desire to see more wonders drove me. My euphoria heightened for at last I reached the end of the valley. It opened into a plateau. Beyond that was the great depths of the lake. I knew I wouldn't go much further. The plateau was home to the most beautiful city. It was full of pale green and yellow lights. There was song in the water. I heard music all around me. They were mostly atonal and discordant tunes. They unnerved me, but I was intrigued. I listened as I approached. It wasn't musical instruments as I first imagined. This was singing. It had to be. It was as if every inhabitant in the grand city were singing the same song. I was convinced they told an important story, if only I could speak that language. The phosphorus statues continued to line the trail all the way to the city gates. I had about an hour's walk ahead of me. By then, I'd reach the city limits. The statues leered and grinned. The judgment was over. They were satisfied with some conclusion that was not revealed to me.

I entered that city. The first avenue I walked was empty. The buildings still shone with their lights. The pale yellows and greens emanated from within the stone itself. The song stopped and the streets were quiet. Where were the inhabitants? Where was this choir who welcomed me with such sound? Shadows moved here and there. They lived in the corners of my eye. As I turned to focus on each, they'd disappear. In the windows, the alcoves, and

doorways they hid. Where they ashamed of their appearances? Where they frightened? Side streets were also deserted. I no longer saw their quick movements in the corner of my eye. Word must have spread that I have arrived. Or they are no longer curious about my presence. The songs resumed, and I felt a terrific pull to the far edge of the city. Some of the lyrics became clear to me. Through the trek in the city streets, more and more of the song was laid bare. I could understand it! They sang of ancient times before man and their longing for our kind. They sang of the stars and paradise. This was followed with tales about strife, war, and conflict. They told me of the Watchers and their wars with the Ensi. I learned how their Celestial Wars nearly cracked the fabric of the universe. Pain, longing, and lost love were the remaining verses. These were a lonely, sad, race of outcasts. Maybe they could no longer go home. What were we to these creatures? Were we pets, companions, children, what? Did we provide happiness or just curiosity? What was our relationship? Their message wasn't clear.

I reached the far end of the city. Only one citizen was waiting for me. One brave member of this wondrous and lonely city came to see me off. It was a squat thing, round and barrel shaped. It resembled a barrel cactus only it was leathery. Around where, I assume, its neck was supposed to be was a leathery collar that contracted and expanded in diameter. Inside the top surface surrounded by the collar was a nest of eyes. It had movements akin to sea anemone. Several thin tendrils spaced equally around its body whipped around in the water. I had a sense that it was very nervous to meet me.

It talked to me, but I do not know how. For in my head were vague images, pictures, and feelings. I knew they were not my own. This was the mayor. It thanked me for visiting his city and bid me to follow. We traveled to a great ledge. There was such a dark abyss below. I had a feeling there was no bottom. A ring of lights climbed out of the dark. They came straight up out of the deep. They hung there right in front of me laying down horizontally. Another ring rose. It followed the same path then stopped several meters underneath the first. Still more came. The pattern continued until there was a rough outline of a vertical tube of lights shining in the darkness below.

I was compelled to fall into the lights. I had to see more. What was at the end of this? I couldn't believe I was walking toward the edge. Why wasn't I running the other way? There was such a great pull of curiosity and something else. Just before I fell, the mayor brushed a tendril across my arm. As it touched me, it left me with a final message. They are the remains of the Watcher race. They were much like us at one time, but had to evolve to protect us and themselves. They had lost the Celestial War and were hiding anywhere they could. The Ensi would one day find them. Until then, they were happy with these occasional offerings. The Ensi were curious about humanity. They were happy to suspend the search for remaining Watchers, if only they could study us. The lights sped past as I processed this. What would they do to me? What could I expect? I fell for so long. The tunnel transitioned to what I thought was horizontal. It was difficult to determine up and down here. I knew I was no longer under the lake. In between the lights ribs, I caught glimpses of stars. The heavens moved around me. The sights were so beautiful. This went on until a new galaxy approached. The ring of lights tunneled into the edge. It delivered me toward a solitary planet.

That's when the tunnel ended. I was on my own in the dark. A vapor enveloped this place. It was miles out and around the planet. As I moved closer, wisps of the clouds

touched me. That's when I knew this place to be Carum, an Ensi outpost. The vapor touched me, telling me this world's story.

For the wind is your voice

It calls to me

oh yeh-keil

Gravity pulled at me, but I knew I approached by a different sort of pull. It was a parody of my free will. To my horror, I could only watch myself swim in the void towards this terrible world.

Oh the stars are your path

I come to you

oh yeh-keil yeh

I descended into the upper atmosphere. It was sulfurous and had a terrible taste of disease on the winds. The greenish yellow clouds moved aside to reveal the architecture below. The landscape was rotten and barren save for the many cities that dotted the landscape. They resembled diseased pock marks on the skin of this world. While they had a terrible repulsive quality, they promised treasures within. I only had to come closer to claim them.

Your orb laid bare

oh yeh-keil yeh barum

Carum oh Carum ho! Your wonders abound

As I approached close enough to see the cities in detail. I saw I was vectoring toward one particular city. They looked like city-states of old. Large walls circled around each while they were packed to the edges with large spires and grotesque geometries. It was impossible for some of these structures to stand as they were. The target city-state below welcomed me. The lights grew brighter. The glow of the rivers grew stronger beckoning me.

oh yeh-keil yeh barum no Carum

The orb shines

Creatures climbed the walls and rooftops hoping to get a glimpse of their new visitor. Claws, tentacles, leathery wings, all manner of anatomy reached up. I landed gently in the river. Strange creatures of such construction pulled my sanity to a near breaking point. The closest of them pulled me out of the water. I was surprised at how gentle they treated me. They took me in and paraded me down the main streets. I saw them. A handful of Humanity lined the streets in cages hanging from the tops of poles. The last of my beautiful haze, that feeling that left me without any anxiety, that made me feel as if I were floating above the ground, that wonderful drug wore away. I was left screaming.

oh Marduk

Marduk protect me!