

Erimem: Moments of Passing

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Erimem first saw the man she would come to think of as the Observer on a side-street in central London. She barely gave him a second glance; forgot him the instant he left her view.

She saw him again a week later. He was standing in the Praça do Império in the Belém district of Lisbon, not far from the Jerónimos Monastery. The west wing of the monastery housed the *Museu Nacional de Arqueologia*, the National Archaeology Museum, to which she had been temporarily despatched as Ibrahim Hadmani's representative, overseeing the return of a small shipment of Bronze Age ironwork from the London Museum of Antiquity, of which Hadmani was director and she (apparently) his new Girl Friday. She thought nothing of the coincidence. Lunch with the Museum Director was of more immediate concern than any random meeting of two out of seven billion people. The crowd of tourists and museum-goers in the busy square parted around each of them with equal indifference, iron filings following lines of force around the poles of a magnet.

Four days later she saw him again, following her return to London, and this time she observed him more closely, unable to ignore this further coincidence. The man was tall, rake thin, and wore a severely cut, utterly creaseless suit. He did not move. At least, he did not move in a way she expected. He did not move in the way other people moved, people from the twenty first century. He did not hustle, or bustle; he did not waddle or wander. His hand was not super-glued to his smart-phone. He seemed utterly divorced from his surroundings, so far as to seem encysted, yet at the same time he displayed an intimate awareness of every single thing, person and event moving or occurring around him, effortlessly shifting in minute ways; left-right, forward-back, up-down, stop-go; which meant that even when there was someone close to him or when he could not avoid a crowd, that person or persons registered his presence no more than they would a stray breath of wind. Erimem had been trained as a fighter since childhood. It was clear to her the man's movement through the space around him was driven almost entirely by muscle-memory. It was as if he'd spent a lifetime learning the patterns through their own lives of everyone around him, everyone he might ever meet. He threaded them with the random-seeming precision of wind through a forest, touching only *this* blossom but never *that*, propelling *that* seed towards germination, abandoning *this* to wither and die. Erimem was instantly and intensely curious about the man; concluding, after watching him for a time, that while he was certainly a curiosity, he did not appear to be a threat. She was trying to decide whether he was interesting enough to investigate further when a motorcycle courier collided with a pram-pushing mother who had somewhat pre-empted the *walk* light at a busy pedestrian crossing. As fast as Erimem could move, the woman, hand super-glued to her smart-phone, had made an assumption about drivers' reaction times which was to cost one of her four month old twins his life. By the time Erimem's attention returned to other things, the street was an order of magnitude

busier than it had been before the accident, and sirens were wailing in ever decreasing spirals. When she looked around for the Observer, he was gone.

Four months passed before Erimem saw the Observer again. This time she was prepared. She had acquired a smart-phone of her own and had learned to use it – as well as any inexpertly designed and poorly manufactured tool could be used. The trouble with devices like this – the trouble with the whole of the consumer-oriented twenty first century if she were honest – was that the concept of single-tasking had apparently gone the way of the Ancient Mesopotamians. Everything nowadays was designed to do everything, to be everything, to all people; to be the most ultimately useful item any dweller in this century could ever want or need. Which of course made every single one of these devices virtually useless, from clocks which imitated sunrise, played radio and made hot drinks; to telephones which doubled as abacuses, frustratingly unrealistic musical instruments and even tiny televisions barely capable of displaying images of such routinely high resolution they could only be fully appreciated in multiplex theatres larger than many royal temples of her own century. Indeed, if the many religions of this century had a deity in common it was apparently the god of multi-tasking. One-touch buttons were certainly a selling point, however programming multi-purpose functionality for rapid response into a device with only one or at best a limited number of single-touch function buttons was problematic on the very best of days. Erimem sorely missed the part of her life when a knife was a knife and nothing but. Today she could buy knives that were also forks and spoons and screwdrivers and nail clippers and laser pointers and peculiar tools for removing stones from horses' hooves. And while such a device would undoubtedly have been useful for an eighteenth dynasty charioteer in his pursuit of war, it was arguably less so for the average twenty-first century inhabitant. The ubiquitous and ill-named *smartphone* was certainly no exception to the rule of over-engineering. Erimem had bought one because Andy had recommended it as an incredibly useful multi-purpose device. In fact like any tool designed to do more than one thing it was virtually unusable by anyone who expected anything more than severely compromised multi-functionality, a deeply annoying fact Erimem discovered when she saw the Observer for the fourth time just moments before a collision between a cement truck and a school bus killed two people and severely injured seventeen more, at which time she failed utterly to capture any meaningful audio or video recordings of him. Despite this she did steal a brief glimpse of the Observer's face. Erimem had an extremely good memory. As a child she had been fascinated by memory games and her natural aptitude had been greatly enhanced by General Antranak, who had honed her imagination into a precision tool any tactician would be proud of. But Erimem did not need a mind capable of winning wars to remember the face of the Observer. It would haunt her days for the rest of her life. The face was smooth, unblemished by lines or creases, wholly free of imperfection of any kind. Moral indecision had never troubled this countenance. It was the kind of face Greek sculptors and Renaissance painters alike would have immortalised unhesitatingly, no matter the cost, in the finest alabaster, the most expensive pigment; and every one would have wept with despair when their finest efforts fell far short of the reality they hoped so desperately to

capture. The Observer's face was that of an angel into which the god of absolutes had breathed perfect life. Erimem, who had ruled an empire and commissioned art now listed among the most timelessly beautiful ever created, had never seen anything like it. The Observer's face was the standard by which her future understanding of symmetry and grace would be measured. In a single breath, the moment in which two lives ended and seventeen more were irreparably damaged, her understanding of beauty, expanded by an order of magnitude, was altered forever.

And yet it was not the Observer's beauty to which Erimem's thoughts returned, time and again, throughout the following year. It was something much darker. A subtle perception shift the observer's appearance in her life had provoked, a thread of thought which over time would weave itself meticulously into a comprehensive tapestry. An image, she came slowly to realise, that only she of all the people now living could perceive, let alone attempt to comprehend. The overwhelming truth of this century was that no-one who lived in it really understood death. Instead they were terrified by it, avoided it wherever possible, spent almost no time preparing for it. The people of the twenty first century were peerless in their veneration of life and all things material. And yet their world and every single life it contained were overwhelmingly influenced by death and the immaterial. The culture into which Erimem had been born strove for thousands of years to understand that which followed the moment of death as well as, if not better than, those brief moments which came before. Death was as familiar to Erimem from her religious instruction as any part of life. And yet here in the twenty-first century she had somehow forgotten this. She was a person with amnesia, cut off by time and experience from the world of her birth and its connection with that story to which life was but a brief prologue. Her arrival in the twenty first century had briefly heralded the thought that perhaps she had come to the *duat*, the place of heaven, on which the priests had instructed her so thoroughly (and futilely) when she had become Pharaoh. On reflection this particular labyrinth of traps and passages, which she navigated daily with debatable success, were in almost all ways less meaningful than she had been trained to expect. Daily she awaited the great questions, the answers to which Those Who Judged would use to calculate the value of her life. Had she killed? Had she been immoral? These questions and many more which she had been assured time and again, by Ibrahim, by Andy, by every TV show or virtual blog this century considered meaningful, were currently enshrined in a spectrum of religious texts ranging from Christian to Islam and everything in between. She waited months, a year, more. The questions did not come. The questions *never* came. No-one and nothing appeared to be weighing the consequences of her actions in life, actions she knew *must* bring serious consequences following her death. Therefore this was not the *duat*. It was not the afterlife. As strange as this century was, it was still a place of *living*. At least, that's how it was until her path met that of the Observer. His existence, his proximity to her life, had initiated a paradigm shift in her perception of her place in this world. Because every time their lives touched it was at a moment of death. This association grew in her mind through autumn and winter, attaining proportions she was unable to ignore, and so it was that during the following spring she began to seek beyond her

immediate realm for answers to questions she was as yet barely able to frame. In this seeking she was accompanied only by her own thoughts. As close a friend as she was, Andy was increasingly separated from her by an ever widening emotional gulf. This century would consider them to all intents and purposes the same age and yet Erimem was thousands of years older, had committed acts which Andy could not possibly understand and would never forgive her for if she were to confess their existence. The morality and consciousness, the very *being* of a person so vastly different would almost certainly be forever beyond her friend's comprehension. Therefore Erimem was sure that Andy's understanding of their friendship was based only upon the most shallow of observations. Perhaps even little more than physical attraction. Then again, perhaps Andy's perception of their friendship was different. Concerning this Erimem was not qualified to guess. One thing she knew: even such a simple thing as friendship, in this century, was something one had to approach with knowledge and imagination akin to tactical military intelligence. This being the case Erimem chose to pursue alone her exploration of the path the Observer had re-opened for her. In this choice she was almost immediately proven wise. As her research reached its first plateau spring was pushed aside by a sweltering, unexpectedly early summer, and Erimem announced her decision to take a break from both her Museum work and her closest friends. Her decision was met with frustration and annoyance but little understanding. She was not surprised. Nor was she surprised when, as she returned from her last day at the Museum to her flat and the travel portal, she witnessed a young bearded man dressed in battered jeans and a threadbare *Oasis* T-shirt carrying an old guitar covered in stickers so badly worn they were barely legible, pushed by three drunken thugs from the platform on which he had been busking into the path of the tube train which would have carried her home, where he was instantly killed. Worse still a nearby commuter, a middle-aged woman making a heroic grab at the busker's desperately clutching hands, lost her balance and was also dragged under the wheels of the train to her death. Ignoring the horrified screams filling the station, Erimem tripped the nearest assailant as the terrified trio bolted past her but was unable to prevent the other two assailants fleeing. Erimem briefly considered killing the man she had captured. However it was clear the deaths had not been deliberate, just a drunken joke gone horribly wrong. The authorities would be more than capable of working that out, and dispensing an appropriate punishment. Only as she returned her attention to the man she had tripped did she realise he had struck his head on a tiled column as he fell. As she turned him over she saw his face was flecked with vomit and his eyes looked in different directions. There was no bruise on his head; nor, now, would there ever be. Gazing up past a sea of stunned commuters, Erimem saw that the Observer was exactly where she expected him to be: at the other end of the platform, exiting the station via the up escalator, well beyond any hope of pursuit.

Time passed, propelling Erimem ever further into her life but bringing her no nearer to herself. She remained divided, at once a child of her own world and an inhabitant all other times and places. Though disguised by the mundane, her thoughts dwelled in this place of duality often; her own private *duat*, unfettered by the geographical or temporal landscapes she briefly inhabited, or the lives she touched there. The portal

could carry her to places thousands of years and billions of light years apart, but the most she could ever do there was try to understand them. Actual integration proved as effortlessly elusive as the hauntingly beautiful Observer whose butterfly intersections with her life, so umbilical and yet so utterly discontinuous, only widened the gulf between her knowledge and her understanding of herself. Erimem was not lazy. She had a far-ranging intelligence and a curiosity about the world second to none (in her experience). She was fit (frighteningly so), she was funny (though people rarely seemed to get that about her), and she saw no reason to dwell on the negative (beyond administrating the occasional war if anyone asked nicely). Her friends loved and protected her (as friends should); and she loved them and protected them in return (although often with more effective weapons). All this considered, something was still missing. Everyone she knew seemed to feel complete in a way she did not; content with their lives in a way she remained utterly unable to achieve and barely able to disguise. To compensate for this, she studied music, poetry; psychology, history, politics, quantum mechanics; ancient worlds and alien lives: the glorious diversity of existence built upon the foundations of leisure time and consumerism. She took lovers and discarded them, to her benefit and theirs. But all these things had in common was their negative space. Their lack of answers *was* their cohesion. And so her life resembled nothing more than an ancient temple, forgotten by time but newly discovered, built from immovably huge blocks with no scrap of mortar to bind them together: it worked but no-one, least of all her, knew *why*. It was a subject she found herself talking about with Andy in the Uni cafe often, and often fruitlessly, squeezed into the free moments her friend could spare between preparing and delivering food to her diverse consumers. But Erimem persisted, because of all the things she'd learned about herself, the most significant was this: she was nothing if not stubborn.

“So here's a thing,” Andy dumped a coffee refill into Erimem's mug, then squeezed onto the stained vinyl seat opposite. “I've been thinking about this Observer guy, right, the one you mentioned the other day, and I remembered something.” She glanced at the table, snagged a cloth and wiped distractedly at the table. “*Crayola?* Jesus.” She shook her head and stuffed the cloth back into her pocket. “What did you say? Oh, right. Yeah. OK, so, this Observer guy. He reminded me of something I saw on the TV. *Planet Earth*, right? They do these *making of bits* at the end of the shows. Talk to the crew, show you behind the scenes, that kind of stuff. Well, I saw one where they talked to this cameraman, and he'd been filming, like, this Komodo dragon and this water buffalo, right? So, Komodo dragons, they're big but they're, you know, slow, because of the whole energy conservation thing they have to do because they're so big, right? So, anyway, they hunt by sneaking up on the water buffalo and biting it on the leg before it notices they're anywhere near. After that they just, you know, wait. They follow the buffalo. Two or three days later the buffalo gets sick and dies, right, cos Komodo dragons have got, like poisoned bites because of their lack of oral hygiene and stuff. Anyway, so, the buffalo pegs it, and the Komodo dragon just ambles up and has a nice lunch, thank you very much.”

Erimem took a sip of Andy's coffee. She did this in the forlorn hope that repeat exposure would one day have an inoculating effect. As usual, she was disappointed.

“So, anyway, there's this cameraman, right? Whose job it is to film all this happening? This poor guy, I can't remember his name, this guy, he's spent weeks on this island making this film, watching the dragons bite the buffalo, following them for days when they get sick, waiting for the moment they die so he can film it, film the dragons finally chowing down. And, bless him, the guy wants to help, right? He knows he could save the buffalo but he doesn't. Because his job is to film the kill. But just the same he wonders, what does the buffalo think when it sees him watching it all this time? Does it associate him with its sickness, its impending luncheon-factor? The poor guy. He's telling us all this and he sounds like he's having a nervous breakdown. But his job is his job, right? Without him there's no film, no show, nobody learns anything. So all he can do is watch. And that's your Observer, E. Every time you see him, he's *watching someone die.*”

Erimem's hand, poised with the coffee half way to her mouth, slowly lowered the mug to the table.

She stared at Andy, who seemed about to continue when she suddenly shifted tack, shouting across the cafe, “Hey! Yeah, you with the hair and the *crayon*. Are you writing on the tables? I'd think twice if I were you. My friend here can use a sword.”

Erimem's eye was caught by a brief movement. She looked down at the table, chocolate sprinkles and dried coffee foam, shifting in the slight breeze Andy's body had made as she'd risen to take on the wielder of the offensive Crayola. Erimem watched the powdery table-scrap in fascination. They tumbled aside, revealing more crayon marks. Crude but artistic. Erimem turned sideways and squinted.

The marks looked like cave art.

“Oy! A table is not a place to draw pictures of buffalo,” Andy told the diner, on the other side of the cafe. “That melamine is only a month old.”

Erimem looked up.

The Observer rose from a table close to Andy, strolled across the cafe and sat down opposite Erimem, beside the cave painting. “Not buffalo. Auroch. Wild cattle. They became extinct when the last male died in the Jaktorów Forest, in Poland, in 1627.”

Erimem stared. *You saw this?*

The Observer shook his head. “Not directly.”

Erimem tensed. *How then?*

The Observer appeared to consider her question. If anything the minute furrow in his brow served only to deepen his perfection. “Life,” he breathed softly, “Is defined by death.” He touched the auroch painted on the melamine table top with a fingertip. The ancient stain in the rock ran briefly; the auroch, poised in the act of jumping, was now horizontal.

Erimem frowned. *You're wrong.*

“Really?”

Life is defined by living. Erimem touched the painting; the auroch leaped, land to sky, was gone. Other figures, therianthropes, matchstick men with the heads of animals, followed, carrying scratched lines that might have been spears or ropes. Raised patterns of dots and lines, a crosshatch pattern reminiscent of DNA, inscribed itself into the rock.

“Art: the explosive first bloom of human imagination.” The Observer traced

patterns dyed into the rock. “Art – living art – is defined by the act of observing. Only by observing do we know we exist. The cameraman might not have said this, but he thought it. Why else take the job? Why else make the art? If not to separate the observer from the observed. Life from death.”

Erimem felt cold and sick.

Accurately documenting the death of another being is not living!

The Observer smiled; Erimem could hardly bear its brilliance.

“How far you have come from the world of your birth.”

Erimem felt a black wind blow through her head.

“Of your entire world, you are the only one who witnessed its passing.”

The black wind howled, inside and out, scouring the cave with fine particles of sand, sucking the breath from her lungs.

“The singular moment of passing of this civilisation will far outlast the millennia of its existence.”

The sick feeling in her gut rose until no act of will could set it aside.

By the time she had finished puking the rock walls around her were full of animals. Aurochs, horses, birds, fish. Figures with the bodies of men and the heads of beasts were among them, pierced by scratched lines through chest or thigh or groin. Blood-painted men with antlers or the antennae of insects, tattooed on the skin of time, flowed alongside women evolving into leonine forms, lions or jaguars. Time-lapse figures evolved from man to deer and back to man; therianthropes bringing with them the wisdom of the sky, the stars, the heavens.

“If only you could understand. You were raised in a culture of *doing*. Positive space. Positive thinking. Positive action. You *are* the art, Erimem. Observing you is the negative space which defines the existence of your more enlightened and benevolent observers.”

Erimem wanted to scream. Beauty and horror tangled in her mind. They were snakes entwined, a double helix, writhing across folded rock, so deeply shadowed by time that no light could penetrate its fissured surface.

And then there *was* light.

An explosion of colour: sparkling, crystalline.

“We are your mother,” the snakes told her.

“We are your wisdom and your body.”

“We are your truth.”

You are not me!

You are not my truth!

But as the spectacular kaleidoscope of rainbow perception crystallised around her; holding her, infusing her, becoming her; Erimem knew that they *were*.

The snakes were her.

They were her in every aspect from her body and mind to her id and ego, and every strand of her DNA. Knowledge and – at last – *understanding* bloomed in her, expanded in her, expanded *her*.

The Observer watched, and smiled, and was himself, and was complete.

Snakes became jaguars became cats were her cat, Antranak.

Antranak spoke to her and his words were glass.
She passed through them and they through her.
Glass was
she
was everything was her
world, her planet, her life made of glass: a soap bubble, girdled with rings.
Iridescent shapes moved in it, Animal faces; snakes. Chinese dragons. People; her
brothers and father. The mothers and sons she had killed.

At the limit of her vision, she was visited by an Egyptian goddess. Or

Perhaps she *was* the Egyptian goddess, visiting others inhabiting the same vision
realm, the glass dream a sand painting, blowing in otherworldly winds, evolving from
this place to that time, transmuting reality, butterfly iridescence, soap bubble history.

Back and back and back.

Atlantea.

A world before this.

A world of light. Archetypes and wonders.

Not temples and impossible rays and alien technology but something at once simpler
and more eloquent: a world of compassion. Of respect. Of acceptance. A world with
no barriers, no divisions. A world that knew itself and embraced itself. A world, like
music, that resonated as one. Where even dissonance was part of the whole, and
loved. A world following which all others would be as forgetful children, fretful and
ignorant, constantly seeking but never discovering, because to discover, one must
remember, and for such sons and daughters as these remembering is only fear.

Erimem beheld Atlantea and knew awe.

Beside her, the Observer also beheld Atlantea; the incandescent doom falling upon
it from the cold, black sky.

*The singular moment of passing of this civilisation will far outlast the millennia of
its existence.*

Erimem felt sickness rise through her, sad and truthful, and full of snakes.

“But... this place, everything in it... is so beautiful. How can you just... watch?
How can you observe and not want to help?”

“The most profound beauty can only ever be ephemeral. Were beauty, true and
perfect beauty, beauty in its purest form, to stand forever; to behold it for even for
even the most fleeting instant would destroy the observer utterly.”

Erimem, who had not cried for more than a decade, felt tears on her cheeks. “You
have perceived a great truth but you do not understand it.”

“My purpose is not to understand; simply to observe and report. There are others
whose purpose is to experience that which I document.”

“And what of understanding? Are there those whose purpose is to comprehend
what others experience and you observe?”

“Comprehension implies action. Action defeats observation.”

“Objective reality is beauty in its purest form. But what of change?”

“Change is pollution.”

“Yet the change from life to death represents ultimate beauty.”

“You misunderstand. The *observation without interference of moments of passing* is the only perceivable representation of beauty in its purest form. This is true for everything that exists.”

“But you could change.”

“Were I to change I would be destroying an aspect of perfect beauty. The destruction of any aspect of perfect beauty destroys the entirety of perfect beauty. Without perfect beauty to define us, my people would have no purpose, and therefore no existence.”

“Then you are changeless. Your people are changeless.”

“Yes. We are the perfect antithesis of perfect beauty, and can only exist because we are defined by it.”

“There are those who define perfect beauty as the continuance of life.”

“Their understanding of perfect beauty is flawed.”

“Then why not save them? It is within your power.”

“To save them would destroy perfect beauty.”

“But to observe perfect beauty is to be destroyed by it.”

“Yes.”

“So you are contributing to the destruction of your own people.”

“This, too, is perfect beauty.”

When the comet that annihilated a global civilisation and initiated the geological era known more than twelve thousand years later as The Younger Dryas slammed into the Laurentide Ice Sheet it was a wall of fire travelling at nearly half the speed of sound.

The impact, large enough to kickstart a new ice age, spread nanodiamonds over an area of millions of square miles. Smaller, but no less lethal fragments of the comet impacted globally, adding to the nuclear winter. Thousands of animal species and nearly all the North American megafauna were rendered extinct. The meltwater raised sea levels by more than three hundred feet. And ten million square miles of coastline around the world were engulfed by a flood so terrifying it became enshrined in global mythology, traumatising its pitiful survivors for thousands of generations to follow.

Erimem observed the cataclysm unfold over time, watched it echo down the long millennia of human history, and struggled to understand the thought, cold and nascent as any virgin snowfall, which now filled her head: *until this precise moment* she had thought herself a woman out of time, cut off forever from the world of her birth, a stranger in a strange land.

She had thought she was alone – but she was wrong.

She was *not* alone. She was merely the child of a civilisation which itself was the offspring of the perfection which had come before. A world forever changed by nothing more than cosmic chance, a trivial scrap of debris left over from the

construction of the greatest temple of all: the solar system, of which her world and its entire history comprised but a single block.

If she was a stranger it was in no more strange a land than any other to which her own civilisation had been a parent.

This was her world, and she was part of it, and it part of her.

The Observer watched, but did not smile; was himself, but was not complete.

The changes echoed down the long moments of passing that followed.

A baby in a crib. A child in a car. A father in a plane. A mother in a spacecraft. A village, wiped out by ignorance and plague; a town destroyed by stupidity and vulcanism; a city eradicated by laziness and nuclear accident; a country annihilated by financial greed and corporate egotism. Murder. Suicide. Genocide. Extinction.

They watched them all, together.

They changed.

We are the same age, the Observer mused at length. *Yet you are old while I am still young. You are dying, ancient of days; I have barely begun to live.*

She knew he was right. "Moments of passing are common to all, the young and the old."

But I am so young, the old man said. *Death has been my employment for less than a single lifetime.*

The irony of this was not lost on her.

"This much we have in common."

You are an extraordinary woman. Tell me your name, and why you have come to me. Tell me before you are lost. Your moment of passing will live for eternity.

She considered. What answer had this vision realm gifted her, after all? The same as it gifted every visitor: knowledge; experience; the barest understanding of self.

"My people desired that their names ring through the halls of eternity. They built great monuments, glorious art and profound heavens to that end. History turned their great deeds and art and heavens to dust. My people were wrong. I will not tell you my name."

Where were the snakes? The Egyptian goddess? The tellers of truth?

"I have lived in a world so different from the place I was born that it approaches the difference between zero and one. I have spent a lifetime trying to understand that change, to fit myself into it, to make myself part of it." She hesitated a moment. Civilisations died. "My mistake was to assume I needed to."

The difference between one and zero is what defines perfect beauty. You understand this. We are the same.

"The difference between one and zero is very different from the difference between zero and one. We are not the same."

Now it was his turn to hesitate. Planets were lost.

You came here to kill me.

"There are many ways to kill a man. You do not have to take a life, to end it."

She was the snakes, the goddess, the truth.

"Everything that exists changes. Perhaps you are not here to observe my moment of passing. Perhaps I am here to observe *yours*."

She watched the Observer through the death of worlds, through planetary collision and supernovae and black holes and quasars. When finally he spoke his wisdom had already begun to fade, driven aside by the only constant the universe would ever know.

You are perfect beauty and I cannot stand before you. You have destroyed me utterly.

The last galaxy fell without a scream across the event horizon of a black hole.

I was not here to observe your moment of passing. I was never here to observe your moment of passing.

The last black holes swallowed each other until only one remained, starving forever in an empty universe.

You were only ever here to observe mine.

The Observer *changed*, but there was no-one left to see.

And so they parted, and this too had happened before, though neither could know it. They would meet again, in his future and her past, though of course there would be no recognition, so profoundly had each been altered by this, their first and last moments of passing.

On her return there were flowers, scented water, a bath; trees and sky; the soft breath of voices, lifted in melody.

There was space and time to think, to reflect on her experience, as utterly alien as anything in this century and yet as familiar to her as anything left behind in her own.

An experience leading inevitably to a single destination: the life she called home.

“Ease down, Pocomoto. My brain totally missed the with-it train this morning.”

Andy's voice, brought thousands of miles to her by world-girdling satellites, was as sharp and clear on the smartphone as if they were in the same room. In many respects, Erimem now saw, they actually were. *“Now let me get this straight. You want me to fly to Brazil, drink Ayahuasca, be violently sick for a week while undergoing vision quests to help you reconnect with the afterlife? E, hun, are you out of your mind? Look, I'm all for smoking a bit of pot, and I love you like my mother's home-baked rock-cakes, but this... this is nuts on the order of – hang on – shut up I'm on the – no Matt, you can't fly to Brazil and drink Ayahuasca! Jesus, you don't even know what Ayahuasca is. Now by all that's mighty finish your homework before I–”*

Erimem sighed and ended the call. Life, it seemed, was something she must continue to explore alone, at least for the time being. With this understanding in mind, she switched off her smartphone and threw it as far as she could into the trees. She had a feeling she wouldn't be needing it again for some while.

With a sigh she slid back down into the bath.

The flowers smelled quite lovely.

And the songs of the healers rose through the rainforest to the sky, moments of passing, soon to return.

“Matter and spirit. As above, so below. Science teaches us to believe that the material world is the primary and

only reality. But] [Viewed through the lens of Ayahuasca, another world becomes visible, perhaps many of them. And because these worlds interpenetrate our own, effects in this world may have causes in the other worlds.] [The material world, if cut off from the spirit world, becomes meaningless and empty.”

Graham Hancock

*Supernatural: Ancient Meetings with
the teachers of Humanity, Century, 2005*

*Jim Mortimore
Planet Earth, 2016*