

Gifts Like Bricks

He is sitting in a very spare room on a simple wooden chair placed awkwardly away from the other furniture. His legs are cocked wide, wrapped to the outside of the chair legs. He looks at them. They are like long, thin boards with square cross-sections. From hip to ankle they are unchanged. They seem, he thinks, like an afterthought of the body. He knows that he is a cartoon character, but this knowledge does not mitigate the disappointment. It is still the condition he is in, and he still must come to terms with it. *And look at this room! A dresser in the corner even though this seems more like the kitchen, and a table with no other chairs. Am I lonely? This room can not possibly support me!* He looks at his square legs again. They're in good shape, not a nick or splinter. He sits stiffly upright. His shoulders tuck backward and his arms droop around the back of the chair in a confident pose.

His joints are simple hinges. He straightens them and stands. No. The ceiling is not tall enough. He bumps his head, then rubs it with the neckerchief that was around his neck. The neckerchief is ridiculous, and he throws it away, and it disappears forever or until he needs it again. He crouches, steps to the window and peers out. It seems to be late afternoon. He can see the sun up above the horizon and a long green lawn. Not a cloud in the pale blue sky. *I'll go outside.* He reaches for the knob on the door and misses it. He misses again. There is no knob. It is a circle painted on a rectangle. There is no door. *Drat!*

Very well, there is no window glass either, and my limbs could fit through anything. He angles himself feet first through one of the quarter panes. The profile of his square head is the same shape as the pane and

all four sides rub the wooden members as he slots it through.

Outside, there is a narrow strip of green that runs from near the house out to a short horizontal line. The sun is there above it in the blue rectangle of the sky. One tree to the side. And then there is absolutely nothing else. No sky, no earth. There is no garden, no carrots poking out, no spinach, no rutabagas. There are no mooing cows. No post and lintel fence. No dog to chase a stick. No bird to chirp a tweet.

The emptiness is black. *What is the black? Is it space? Is it something I can walk into? Is the black an attribute of something, or is it some thing?* From the window, he had stepped onto the green strip and now he gambles a step onto the black. He straddles the border. It's okay. He pulls the other foot over. He looks at his simple feet and thinks, *I have separated myself from that. From what?*

He takes more steps away from the house out into the black. Nothing happens. He keeps going.

What to do. *Am I anxious? Do I want to retreat to that uncomfortable place I came out of? Does the black cause fear? Does it cause panic? Will it reveal something to me?* He feels that he could not yet answer these questions. He keeps going.

It seems that I can walk anywhere at all. Should I think of the future? Should I think about time?

As he walks, he looks into the black which he wants to say is deep but cannot because there are no references to establish depth. He keeps moving. It is an odd sensation to keep his eyes open for so long without actually registering any objects within his vision. There are minor disturbances but he thinks they must be artifacts of his vision, imperfections of the rods and cones. In the darkling dark he thinks of a figure. This looks like the space in which you might see an astronaut untethered from her ship spinning on her own axis and receding into the distance until she is a simple bright point

of light like a far away star, and then at an indiscernible moment becomes nothing at all, becomes part of the black.

Will the black always continue to be nothing?

In the nothing there is a question for him of whether there is something. If he does feel fear, then there must be something to fear, something that will appear, something that is here. He thinks then that he has not established with absolutely certainty that the black is nothing. There still might be something. And the something and the question of the something keeps him going. As he continues he surmises that the black is deep though also understands that he only has knowledge of the particular path he has taken.

Then for the briefest instant he sees a flash of something that frightens him. But he's not certain if he was frightened of the flash or of the specific image because he can't quite identify what it was. It was something like a memory. Then in a rush it returns. He is being chased by a very, very angry dog.

They are running on a sidewalk at an impossibly fast speed. He thinks, *I have comically high knees when I run.* And there is a sense that this chase has happened before.

Why is the dog mad at me? Did I do something to it? Is it just a mad dog that chases everything?

Then, Bam!, the dog is nipping at his heels. He can hear all of its terrifying animal sounds—the huffs, the little taps of its nails on the sidewalk, quick wet grunts, low growls like afterthoughts. He's looking straight ahead, but sees the wet sharp teeth in rows, the pink and black gums, the very strong, dumb force of instinct seeking to sate itself.

He's running desperately, and he's losing control of himself. He thinks it might look funny to someone watching. Then, ahead, out of nowhere he sees a brick falling from above. His momentum is too

great to stop or step aside. All he can do is accelerate past it. He lunges. Phew! Calamity evaded in the nick of time.

But there's a commotion behind—a muffled, clipped yelp and a crash of soft and hard thuds that come to a quick stop. He turns and sees the dog laid out on the sidewalk with a brick deeply implanted into its brain pan. The body is lifeless. Either there is a carousel of stars running about its head or it just seemed like there was. He stands still, staring at the dog. His adrenaline stabilizes, and then the entire apparition vanishes. He is alone in the black and realizes he can no longer see even the house from which he left.

The cycle of panic and recovery felt familiar. *What happened? What was the source of that image? Why should I conjure fear in this place? Was it necessary? Might not consequence be a concept at odds with these circumstances?* He did not know.

All around there was still nothing but black. He thought of what was not here. He wished for a prairie to walk in and there was no prairie. He wished for red leaves reaching through a white fence that rusts at its joints and the salty, sweet puddles of melted ice cream between the bowl and the scoops, and there was nothing. Then he bent himself as if he were sitting down to a chair for dinner. He pantomimed a passionate plea to spare his mother from the stockade. He moved his limbs in the ways that he could and watched them. He slapped his forearms against his upper arms. He leapt straight up and landed on his bony ass with his legs up in a V. He limped about like a cripple in a circle.

It struck him how playful all of this anxious activity was. *Hm, it seems I might be happy!*, he thought, and it vexed him. But that is not possible. There is nothing here. Nothing to be happy about. "How sad I am!" he tried. It didn't work. The words had no effect. *But I don't want this!*

Then the memories: eating hamburgers the size his head with his best friend, Sam the talking llama. They washed them down with great foamy mugs of beer. He remembered it again and again, each time recalling a different iteration of a happiness. He remembered watching it rain ducks with Sam, and the day they had to rescue Sam's cantankerous uncle from the belly of a whale.

It was all still black. He was sitting in his joints' best approximation of the 'The Thinker.' *Is this something I chose? He thought of the house and the blue sky. Did I exhaust my possibilities there? Couldn't I have done something more? No.* It had not been possible to stay. He had made the only choice he could have, and thought it best not burden himself too long with such questions.

Then he stood. The black was still black, just as black.

He recovered his mood. He essayed, *But maybe there is something here in the black. I simply haven't found it yet. I will keep walking.* In the possibility, an imperative. And so he went on practicing all kinds of walking in the dark, funny walks and sad walks and nothing walks. *And maybe I will run a bit. I like to run.* Gifts like bricks can fall from the sky at any moment.