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about 5,000 words

Where Doves No Longer Sing

By Grant Gaugush

When I step from the door of my hut and into the furious desert sun, the obelisk greets me. As my vision rings with the brilliance of the land's hatred, it guides me forward with the cries of the damned, the cries of those for whom Hell is a certainty. It wails into my ear of the crisis to come, and I fall to my knees upon the sand. My hands, now claws, tear at my flesh. My skin is parchment beneath the shimmering sky, and the obelisk translates my fate upon it, my blood its ink, my bones its quill. I resist. I pull back from the thing. It presses forth, its cruel talons digging deeper. My future spills forth from my unwilling flesh. The obelisk continues to transcribe with the odious passivity of the void. The agony rips forth the words that have for so long lain dormant within my heart, a babbling stream of nonsense upon which I am written. I

scream, and my cries rise into the desert sky in brotherhood with those countless others. Their adulation drowns my terror.

My vision gives way to darkness, and I pray that, when light welcomes me home, the obelisk will not stand by its side. I collapse to the ground, the sand piercing my form with searing lances like those of the long-dead crusaders who paved this land with their corpses and became the dust upon which we tread. I urge the shadow forth. It refuses me, denies my attempts at freedom. I grasp forth for the abyss, but reality's corpse-like fingers gather about my throat.

I open my eyes, and before me stands the obelisk. Its pallid immensity peers out from a sea of adoration. The hands of my friends rest upon the thing, their fingers quivering where they make contact with the pillar. They shrink back from it upon making contact, as if the monolith would perceive their touch as blasphemy. I no longer recognize those within the crowd; they flow together in one cohesive mass of *being*, all sense of self abandoned in the midst of their shared adulation.

The center of the horde parts to make way for the priest. He is caught in holy intimacy with the obelisk, the wind ushering his ebony cloak to a flutter as he stands with arms held high. He seems a vulture, wings borne aloft upon the whispers of ghosts. He falls to his knees before the pillar. Hands and face held high, he basks in the shadow of the obelisk. His lips form around a soundless phrase: "the blessing!"

As I watch the obelisk with unblinking eyes, the crowd undulating about it in a fervid waltz, I realize that the sun's light does not glance upon the thing's pallid bulk.

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The words that dance across the priest's lips in that divine moment soon begin to fill the mouths of many. Over the next few weeks, talk of the "blessing" is all that greets me as I walk

about the town. It fills the air like music. I place a hand to my chest and feel not the beat of my heart, the baseline of the song of my being. The obelisk has brought forth the melody of my people. *Will placing my hand upon the pillar let me see? See how to play the lyre?*

No one knows of the obelisk's origin. Born of the union of unending drink and rabid speculation, a few theories rise from the masses. Some think it a warning from a neighboring village, one that demands our peace and submission. Others believe it to be a sick joke, played by the youth of our settlement upon their brothers and sisters. A few grasp desperately for reason, testing the earth about the construct and concocting mad theories of nature and sediment, of the earth and its vicissitudes. Their findings are meager at best.

In the void of knowledge, one man steps up to provide guidance: the priest. Father Stavros is an old man, one seemingly born of the desert itself. His features are of rough-hewn stone, his graying hair wrought from the scorching winds that howl across hateful sands. He has existed far longer than I have, and, if left untouched, will likely live on many years past my own demise. He brings God to a land that lacks any touch of the divine. He is the order of our village, and his personal guidance lies with the book ensconced within his ebony robes. When "blessing" graced his lips, so too did it implant itself upon the tongues of my brethren.

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"My brothers and sisters, I urge you towards *faith*! Forget the idle gossip of the skeptic! Forget the endless prattle of the doubtful! Forget the feeble attempts of these 'men of reason' to banish belief from your hearts! Cast it all off, off into the desert that has brought us such pain. There is no future to be found in their arms! The most for which we can hope is their own eventual revelation."

I don't know what drives me to the church today. The church that I have gone many years without. I find no shelter beneath the roof of reason, nor that of God.

“And it will *sting*. Yes. Yes, it shall. Like a hundred-thousand thorns cast from the heavens themselves! They will endure the frenzy of God, and they will wish to crumble to ash before it, but, should their hearts be strong and their souls virtuous, they will withstand the flurry, and we shall accept their bleeding forms into our loving arms. But many will not. Many will fall to the sand, and many will perish beneath the desert sun.”

My nails carve crescent scars into my palms, and I spill my silent blood upon the pew. The essence of my body speaks not of the word of God. It says nothing at all. The pressure of songs unsung clamps down around my skull. My lips quiver, and I force them shut, fearing the cry they will unleash.

My desire lies before me, an unruly tangle of velvety yarn that seems woven of my blood. I grope with limp fingers at the threads that dangle out from the mass, but, just as I get a grip around them, they slip through my grasp, slithering away with a taunting hiss. *The words won't come. Why do you think that is?* The melody is locked away within my chest, a vault from which there is no escape, a padlock for which I lack the key. *Perhaps God will bring me the answer. Where else do I have to turn?*

“This land has forsaken us for so long. My Children, I have watched your torment with tear-filled eyes, for I have wished to share my true knowledge of the holy with you all, but no opportunity presented itself. To gain full understanding requires a divine demonstration. One that I could not supply. But now, my people, the time has come. For God has gazed upon your struggle—*our* struggle—and He has deigned to grant us this grandest of offerings. This is a sign. Yes, a sign of things to come. We are *destined* to rise above all others, for the Lord favors us with

his love. One last test lies before us. Turn your offerings upon the *Blessing*, for it is the lodestone of God and the sign of His arrival. We are to honor it with the highest praises, bathe it in the greatest oils, feed it with the richest of foods. We shall suffer for it, so that it might alleviate *our* suffering. Prepare, my Children, for we are to be cleansed of our sin; the penance that this land has wrought upon us has nearly reached its end.”

He leans upon the lectern, his face streaming with the tears of the future damned. Silence coils itself around the pews and rafters of the small chapel, a ghostly thing whose presence calls the hairs on the back of my neck to animation.

The next moment, the room erupts. My fellows fling praises at the priest, fall to their knees, cry out in adoration of the scion of God that stands before them and the promise that may as well have been carved upon the pallid surface of the obelisk. The priest rises, his arms held high, and joins them in their prayers.

I stand, fight my way through the dancing crowd, out into the furious desert sun just beyond the nave doors. It stings my eyes, but my face remains slack. *Is this what will bring me meaning? Is this the key to the yarn?* I rebel against the thought, but it calls to me once more, calls with its siren song to the truth that lies within my heart.

The music of joyous adulation quivers in the air around me. *This is the song I must play. This land offers no other answer.* My gaze rises to the obelisk, lancing from the town square. I cry out to it. It offers no reply.

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“Blessing”, twisted by the tongue of Father Stavros, turns to “*Blessing*”, and those I have come to know as my friends are now my Brothers and Sisters.

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Three months pass, and the Temple is completed at last. Where once the *Blessing* was bared to us all, now it is hidden from sight, hidden within the radiant folds of our stone edifice. Hewn of the earth, the Temple sprawls across the town. It radiates out from the *Blessing's* abode, its rings growing larger and larger until it lounges across the subservient sands.

At first, it contained itself within the small square from which the *Blessing* sprouted. Its walls, draped in ornate tapestries woven by the order of Father Stavros, lightly kissed the homes and hovels bordering the town's center. We were content with this, until Father Stavros called to our attention once more the fact that we were bound to suffering, and that through greater hardship we could quickly relieve ourselves of our burden. Those who claimed ownership of the buildings placed themselves forth as sacrifices. So, the sun gleaming off of the fervor in our eyes, we took the hammer and chisel to those poor homes, and made way for the expansion of the Temple.

The cycle continued into the weeks that followed, the very fabric of our settlement slowly giving way to the continuation of our mission, until we came to the consensus—under the leadership of Father Stavros—that we would be better suited to give up everything to the Temple. And so it was that the last homes were demolished by our own hand, and we furnished ourselves with meager amenities upon the cool stone floor of the Temple's outermost ring. The only one afforded greater comfort was Father Stavros, whose abode also served as the angelic home of the *Blessing*. “The greatest of revelations often arrive through the medium of dream,” he said to us, “so you would be depriving yourselves of proper guidance if you were to deny my stay within the *Blessing's* own chamber.” We saw the logic in this, and agreed to his terms without hesitation.

On the night the traveler arrives, I am laying upon my carpet, woven of rough fiber, placed atop the frigid stone floor of the Temple's outermost ring. In my dreams, I see that which greets me when I awake. I walk through the Temple, guided about its many concentric rings by a thread of vermillion yarn. I know that it leads me to the cathedral's center. The thread quivers with the beat of a heart. *My heart.* I place a hand to my own chest, and I feel nothing within. Frantically, I claw at my empty ribcage, one palm still placed upon the thread. After a time, I calm myself. *This is why I have to reach the center. This is what awaits me.*

A call tears me from my slumber. I jolt up from the floor, search for the source of the commotion. The memory of it screams through the night like a banshee. I place my bare feet beneath myself, my long, loose-fitting attire whispering in the shadow like the prelude of my heart's song as I shiver in the cold. I sleep within a great chamber full of my Sisters. Two hallways extend forth from our room; one still bathed in darkness, the other lit by the dim dancing of a torch's flame. It casts the tapestries upon the wall—all of the *Blessing* and the Father, none of us—into a strange relief, like a half-formed memory.

It is from the lit passage that the shout resonated, and, accompanied by my Sisters, I tread towards the light. We pass through chamber after chamber, all chiseled stone lit only by the soft light of the torches within their braziers, the faint rustling of the tapestries in the wind filling the empty halls. A great mass of Brothers and Sisters, we arrive at the Temple gates. There stands the guard, along with Father.

The two stand abreast of a stranger. He is young, a brown cloak gathered about his shoulders and a grimy, wide-brimmed hat perched atop his head. Faint traces of stubble lay strewn about his cheeks and chin like the aftermath of some disaster. In the darkness, he smiles.

“You've found it too, haven't you?” he calls.

“The *Blessing*?” Father asks.

“The *Stone*, I think you mean,” the man replies, his grin stretching wider as a brow raises.

Father frowns, but does not comment. “From whence do you hail?”

“A village east of here. About four day’s travel.”

“And what brings you here?”

“The *Stone* made itself known to us a few months back. I’d heard tell of this place for some time, but never found the chance to travel. Now that we’ve got everything pretty well settled, I thought I’d make the journey and see if our neighbors had been similarly blessed. Seems they were.”

His grin mocks us. *We* are the chosen, the ones destined for greatness, for God’s love. He can’t possibly have bestowed it upon Others. I see the sentiment reflected in the bent faces of my Brothers and Sisters. Lit by the silver scales of the moon’s glow, their furrowed brows and twisted lips cast shadows about their features. Violence simmers in the air, but the man seems not to notice.

“Come in, come in,” Father says. We part to admit the man.

Father commands us to rest once more, but, in the wake of my Siblings’ passing, I slink through the darkness after the man. He is led by Father, winding through the Temple’s rings, until we reach the penultimate loop. In this chamber, not a single spot of stone lays bare to the eyes. The floors are covered in finely-woven rugs. The walls hang thick with offerings and swinging censers from which are released the comforting aroma of incense. A gilded table sits in the room’s center, and it is at this table that the man and Father sit.

I quiver from the mere thought of my presence in a sanctum such as this, one so close to the *Blessing*, but my curiosity and rage overtake me, and I remain. Distantly, I hear my heart thump between the walls of the Temple, just beyond reach.

Father and the man talk for hours. Father offers him a variety of delicacies, and the man partakes, complimenting Father upon the closure of every bite. They laugh together, speak of worldly things, and Father has the man scrawl a map relating the distance between our settlement and theirs on a piece of paper. They imbibe a mysterious drink that emanates a sweet scent. As the night grows old, the man slouches in his chair, his faculties limp.

It is then that Father brings his knife into the man's throat.

Father bends the man's head before him as if giving benediction. The man struggles within his grasp, blood flowing from the terrible wound in his neck. Father jams the blade harder into his throat, so hard that the dagger's point emerges from the man's spine. Where once laughter filled the chamber, now only the solemn echoes of the man's croaking ring.

As I watch Father slay the man, I wish that it was my hand wrapped about the knife's hilt. The warm drip of his blood calls my fingers to animation. They writhe within its imagined grasp, yearn for the taste of the offering upon the altar of God.

The man's corpse comes to rest upon the table, and Father stares into the darkness for a time. He does not move. Then, he screams. He screams with the suddenness of a miracle and the rage of the faithful. He screams long into the night, his fury echoing throughout those hallowed halls until they emerge into the outermost ring—the ring of my Siblings—as not but the whisper of the night wind.

He screams, and a question takes root in my mind. *Is this Father's song?* Quickly, I tamp it out. As I slither back into the hall where I belong, I find its presence refuses total obliteration. I sleep.

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In the morning, Father wakes us in a rage. Darkness has gathered about his bloodshot eyes, and his face wriggles as he speaks. He leads us into the entrance hall where our Brothers already stand. Upon one of the walls, the corpse of the man has been strung up, his offering to our God dried upon his chest. Father stands beneath him and begins to rave against the Others, those from the settlement four days out. His arms grasp desperately towards eternity as he does so, his ebony cloak billowing about him as the harsh desert wind sweeps in from the open gateway.

He speaks of blasphemy, and we all nod. He speaks of our mission, and we all intone. He speaks of what we must do, and we all agree.

Father announces that our Brothers will gather their weapons, and they will journey across the desert to the settlement where the Others reside. With Father at their helm, they will purge all traces of the Others from the face of the earth. They cheer, their hands raised to Heaven in mirror of Father's, and rush off to gather their holy instruments.

Concerned, I approach Father. "May I come along too, Father?"

"No, my dear. Although your offer is appreciated, you may not."

"Why not, Father?"

"The *Blessing* requires solidity, surety. A straight back. This is only to be found in your Brothers. You see, a man's perfect image requires a sure-set spine. He is a worker, a fighter, a leader. *That* is the purpose of man. The *Blessing* shows us this image, for that is humanity's most

immaculate form. A *woman's* perfect state, however, demands a bent back. Cleaning, housekeeping, child-rearing. All pursuits that one such as yourself should aspire to explore.” He places his hands on my shoulders. “I appreciate your offer, my dear, but your proper place is here, alongside your sisters. You must look after the *Blessing* in our absence, and it shall prepare you for your perfect future. Fret not, my Daughter. This is your purpose.”

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They depart later that same day. My Sisters and I watch as they vanish into the simmering horizon, their dark forms rendered not but a mirage upon the sunburnt sands. I mull over what Father has said. *He said this is it. My purpose.* I gaze about the fervid faces of my Sisters. I no longer feel the beat of my heart, the strum of the cord. God’s fingers do not play across the crimson chords of my blood, my soul, my being. *Why would Father lie to me?*

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Nine fraught days ensue. I turn inward, consider the silent strings that lay buried within my chest. For the first two days, I can hardly bring myself to glance upon them. To bring my fingers to their embrace would be a blasphemy. *That is God’s instrument alone,* I think. I know those threads will set me ablaze, call lightning down upon my wanton flesh, flay my skin from my form and bare the truth of my horror to those I hold dearest.

On the third day, I can resist no longer. The flesh of a profane apple tastes sweetest of all.

The music begins tepid, wary, unsure of its own meaning. Over the coming days, it begins to develop. My palms run with the blood of my delicious wounds, calluses taking shape upon the fingertips of my soul. My fingers dance across the strings, the melody of unspooled poetry twining about the cathedral of my chest. Where once not a whisper rang through those hallowed halls, now my voice echoes.

My Sisters notice. They withdraw from me, favor me with glares that were once directed elsewhere. At the man. At the Others. *Is that what I am to them now? But we share the same home. Don't they recognize me?*

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Just as I am prepared to sing the ballad of my being, Father returns.

The party emerges from the zealous horizon, lances and blades held at attention, points toward Heaven. Lit by the halo of the rising sun, hazy orbs lie pierced upon their spears. As they draw closer, their forms resolve.

Their lances drip with blood from the skewered heads. The corpses' tongues loll and wriggle in the wind, caught in the act of prayer.

The men arrive. They are coated in the offering of their enemies. Their number is fewer than when they set out, but gleeful smiles cling to their lips. Their eyes gleam wild against the medallions of silver and gold that lay draped across their shoulders. Father holds the head of an elderly man upon his horse. He raises his hands to the sky and cries out, and my Brothers follow suit.

“God has smiled upon us, my Children! Let our rags and our treasures and the bodies of our enemies speak of our victory! We have taken blade in hand and cut down all those who would oppose the righteous word of the Lord. Rest assured, Children, that God shall reward us handsomely for our service. The day draws closer. The day of our deliverance is nigh.”

“Are they all gone?” one of my Sisters asks.

“A band of them fled off into the desert, but they will know to never again grace our presence, unless the fear of death does not whisper through their hearts.”

A sea of questions floods around me, but I care not for the answers Father provides. The music within my chest has gone silent. *How is my song meant to compete with God's? How arrogant must I be, to think that I could take His place?* The lyre goes limp in my heart's hands. The calluses smooth over, and the tune that had come to define me fades into not but a memory. The cathedral rings silent once more.

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The next four days are spent in the midst of jubilation. Time no longer trickles along its ancient track. My Brothers and Sisters dance and cavort through the Temple, showering the *Blessing* in the spoils of their war. Night is a foreign concept. Even after darkness falls, the flickering flame of the torches in their braziers gleams from the gilded surfaces of the silver and gold trinkets that litter the halls and chambers of the Temple. Once, I gaze too long into the medallions, and their brilliance daggers through my eyes. I stumble about, blind, for hours. No one offers assistance. I must seem nothing more than another mad reveler.

Father hosts lavish banquets within his chambers. To sit so close to the hall of the *Blessing* tugs at my heart, but Father still forbids us to enter its abode. He relays our offerings to it, and I am struck by the sense that my hands are sullied. After dinner, I step through the halls of the Temple, arriving at last to the grand gate and the timid night beyond. A row of pikes surges into the starlit horizon, heads perched upon their peaks. All blood has drained from them; now, their skin gleams as white as the sand beneath the fearful moon. I wonder what melody their blood played. The flesh has nearly rotted from their skulls, oozing down in vile, waxen folds. The face of faith.

My features convulse at the sight, and I scurry off to sleep.

The fifth day of the revelry plays out much the same. No more do I partake in the extravagance. I escape from the Temple doors, rush off across the dunes as bile rises in my throat. I run until my legs cry for mercy, and I collapse to the sand. The stench of the corpses clings to me all the while.

I remain there until night falls. As the moon peers above the horizon, I watch the riders approach. They draw nearer and nearer to the Temple, fury contorting their forms, and, no matter how fast I run, I cannot reach my Siblings in time.

The riders surge through the Temple gates, and the screams of those I love rise like a mirage above the moonlit sands.

The slaughter lasts for hours. Flames lick from the Temple's doorway as my scorched Siblings try to flee. The riders tear my people apart. When I reach the Temple, I race through the halls, dodging about the carnage. I slip on the blood. When I meet the floor, I fall upon a bed of corpses. Severed heads lay piled against pillars. The riders take their spears in hand and skewer my Siblings. My friends. I lay there and I cry and I scream and none hear me above the din of terror's song.

I watch as a man drags Father Stavros from a flaming archway. The man holds him by the hair, his other palm clasped about his blade. His lips curl in a rictus as he saws Stavros' head from his shoulders. The ebony-clad corpse collapses to the stone floor. The man holds high the priest's head and screams into the night.

Is this what the Others saw, I wonder, when my people came to their town?

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I lay huddled among the ruins of the Temple as the riders depart. They giggle and scream like madmen, their cries echoing across the silent sands as they race off into the darkness. Hours

pass before I dare to stir. I rise, blood seeping from my bent form. The strings begin to dance once more. They lead me towards the center of the Temple.

As I pass through the halls of the place that was once my home, I do not gaze upon the carnage. My eyes remain leveled at my goal. My purpose. No trepidation fills me as I step into the chamber of the *Blessing*.

It lies upon a pile of torn, bloodstained tapestries. It has collapsed to the floor; the jagged remnant of its connection to the earth daggers up from its pedestal. I lean down, place my hand upon its fallen form. As we are about to touch, I find that I still hold faith in its divinity, that bringing my hand against it will show me that the priest was right.

When my palm meets its pallid face, I feel nothing.

I laugh. I laugh as I stand, as I retreat from the chamber, as I step out once again into the zealous night. I laugh until my howls turn to tears, and I cry until I find I no longer can. When I am empty, collapsed upon the sand, the music returns. My eyes grow wide as my soul takes the lyre in hand once more. Its fingers recall the calluses, the blood, the dance of the vermillion strings. I claw at my chest as it quivers with the beat of my heart. I cast the dust from the pews of the cathedral. The song rings true once more.

I begin to sing. My melody does not speak of faith, or God, or the obelisk. I do not know what the words are, but I am certain that “blessing” is not one of them. I sing until my throat rubs raw like sand, my knees grow weak like the wind of the desert.

Just as I am about to stop, I see someone pull themselves from the gate of the Temple. They rise, bloodied, and meet my eye. Two more follow them. Then three, then four. My friends drag themselves from the corpses of those they called “Brother” and “Sister” and step across the body of the man once named “Father”. They come to stand about me, their shoulders drawn back

in some attempt at dignity. Their eyes usher my song forth, and I begin to sing once more. They learn the tune that not even I know, and their voices rise with mine, rise in greater brotherhood than any bound by blessing or faith. They huddle close, gathered against the night's chill, as God burns behind us, and I pray, for the first time, with all of my heart. I pray to humanity. I pray that our joy might be allowed to exist. I pray that we will find a future for ourselves upon the cruel sand. I pray that we will never have to stop singing.

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