

If You Saw...

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If you saw two bodies entwined in the dance
Bound to each other with effortless grace,
Joyous, momentous, elliptical grace!
They whirled through the ether, in delicate spirals,
For eons they danced, until in the blink
Of proverbial eyes, one crossed o'er the brink:
One caught a cancer, and started to brew
And choke and ferment and splutter and spew,
Find itself overtaken, cauterised, bled,
Starved, smothered, covered in rash
Wheezing away, overheated with fever
Till it could dance no more, it could not keep step
As it coughed up its blood, and collapsed in a spasm,
And cancer descended on dancers romancing
The universe, and time; and life, in time,
Till the life turned malignant and tripped up the dance:
What if you knew that the cancer was you?

If you saw the people, what cancer can do!
The children stopped playing, the men downed their tools,
The young stopped to pause, the old paused to stop,
The women gave poise, the leaders made noise,
The rich stopped their feeding, the poor forwent feeling,
And the followers listened, and the listeners followed,
The first world woke up, the third world sat down
And the clouds cleared away, and all of the people —
Not just your people! — not just my people! — but
All of the people that ever, and always,
and now and forever will ever have lived! —
With the ghosts of their parents, their parents and parents,
Generations stretched back to the dawn of the species
Thousands and, nay, hundreds thousands years past,

You could not avoid them, the whole of the family:
Mothers with children, and fathers with children,
And wizened old voices, and laughter and stories
And wisdom and knowledge, and questions and reason
And passion and folly and crying and love,
Not just the past, not just hundreds thousands,
But hundreds of thousands and millions years on! —
Millions years more of those yet to appear,
Those innocent children — yet more as unborn —
In full expectation of their turn to be,
All your children, my children, their children and children
Till the end of the sun and the end of all days,
None was excluded, none were held back,
Not fascist, nor Nazi, nor Caesar, nor sultan,
Nor Jew nor gentile, nor emperor nor citizen,
Nor conqueror nor conquered, nor blackfella nor whitefella,
Nor good fellow, bad fellow, criminals, generals,
Nor executives, nor lawmakers, oilmen nor lobbyists,
Tradesmen nor women, housekeepers, wives,
Farmers, houseworkers, outworkers, sweatworkers,
Hunters nor gatherers, slaves nor free men
Nor free women, landowners, aristocracy, slaves,
Proletarian, vegetarian, serf nor bourgeois,
Nor communist nor capitalist nor anarchist nor phalangist,
Nor futurist, nor traditionalist, mercantilist, imperialist
Nor faithful nor secular nor agnostic nor heretic
Nor stoic nor epicurean, neither Catholic nor Protestant,
Nor Pagan nor Buddhist nor Hindu nor Mormon
Nor Serb nor Albanian nor Muslim nor Croat,
Not the Palestinians nor Israel, nor the citizens of Iraq,
Nor the Syrians, the Koreans, Venezuelans, Iranians,
Kenyans, Bolivians, Namibians, Nicaraguans
The kind with the vicious, the healers with murderers,
The scholars with bigots, the artists with Philistines,
Don't let me die, some said! Don't make me cry, some said!
I'll take anything — but please not my child!
Let me have more, some said! Fuck you all, some said!
Take me whole, some said! Hold me tight, some said!
Save yourselves, some said! Be ye saved, some said!
Sieg heil, some said! Fight a war, some said!
Hold the line, some said! Tow the line, some did.
But for the most part — and for the best part! —
The ordinary people, not -ese and not -ism,
They stood there and shrugged — I'm just a human! —
And spilled over borders, and greeted their neighbours,
And played with their children, and looked to the future,

And cared not for great things, but just to continue;
Not for them all of these overblown trumpets!
The best part said nothing, and wandered, confused,
Staggering now, they tottered unsteady,
As if the earth lurched, besmirched by their industry,
As if the earth's spasm had shaken them too,
Robbed of their pleasantries, certain no more,
Oh there was more — oh there was more! —
To life in this world than cheap petrol prices!
Again insignificant, floating in space,
Without direction — there's no up in space! —
Roused from conformity, forced into puberty,
Silenced by grim revelation of wrongs,
This planet is only a miniature starship!
Swiftly reverted to innocence lost,
So eager to reclaim the goodwill they'd lost!
All of them! — All of them! — All of the people
That ever, and always, and now and forever
Will ever have been and will ever have lived! —
The whole civilization, pre-civilization,
Post-civilization, ancient and modern,
Post-modern to present and all that's to come,
Entire human project, evolutionary epic,
Thirteen thousand million years long in the making,
In all of their habits, their rituals and fears,
The whole of the species paraded before you,
Put on their best faces and virtues and smiles,
Turned out for the moment, for this one occasion,
And played, and laughed, and studied, and shook
Each other's hands, and their heads, and remembered nostalgia,
They crammed on the land mass — they jammed all the land mass!

—
And Europe grew warm, and Africa thundered,
And Asia flowed over, and Australia sweltered,
And America repented, Antarctica melted,
From the weight of the gathering — reunion — preunion! —
The party had gathered, the crew had been summoned,
And filled all the islands with shocks of bright vestments,
The ship filled with passengers, decks cleared for the crush,
The siren had sounded, the islands had foundered
As ships on an orb that, deluged and flooded,
Threatened to sink those few vessels remaining.
So stood the humans, so stood the proud
And the humble, the paragons of animals — sometimes! —
Packed on to continents, over the globe!
The clouds cleared away and the crowds turned away

From the ground, and looked up, at the skies there above —
Like spokes on a wheel, a luminous wet sphere,
Like floodlights ascending to heaven from home,
Like cancerous cells of a terminal tumour,
Beautiful, innocent, terminal tumour,
Their eyes pierced the void and looked into the cavity
To broadcast their tragedy out to the world,
And half saw the stars, saw an infinite blackness,
Saw the coldness and loneliness, nebular nothingness,
Themselves at the helm of a ship in deep space,
But bound to observe from the terrestrial observatory,
Observed the distance — and gave up on escape! —
Saw the world as it is, there would be no saviour,
They'd grown — how they'd grown! — and outgrown their mother,
Couldn't quite yet leave home, but yet it was time:
Grow up now children, stand on your own feet!
The dreamers still dreamed of a yet better world,
The couples still kissed and the dispossessed smiled,
But the lonely found loneliness appeased their loneliness
As their neighbours all huddled to fight off the chill
Of the universe — they drank, to the meaning of it all!
And from their huddle, while the void loomed above,
Declared — Brother and Sister!

— *if we should survive,*

And, surveying the scene, realising what that meant,
Then — and then they broke off, and left it unsaid
And again shook their heads, and wept,

— *never again!*

The other half saw blue sky, and warmth — *unseasonable* warmth

—
And celebrated the day, gave thanks for the day,
Seized hold of the day and seized hold of the life
And seized hold of each other, looked out to the blue,
And wished that it would never end.

If you saw two bodies entwined in the dance
Bound to each other with effortless grace,
Joyous, momentous, elliptical grace!
They whirled through the ether, in delicate spirals,
One was all gold, and one was all blue —
But not yet all blue — for marooned in the sea
Were the islands that founder, with inhabitants that flounder,
But for you they came out, all of the people
That ever, and always, and now and forever
Will ever have been and will ever have lived!
And you did not see green or brown 'twixt the seas,

But all of the people: all of the whole
Conurbation, the cities, the landscapes of faces,
All staring out, all through the dance,
The whole human family, whole human endeavour,
Staring out, eyes wide open, hopeful and afraid,
Knew what you'd done, knew that the dancer
Was slowing and coughing and covered in rash,
As cancer descended on dancers romancing
As the vastness descended on all of the people
Of what they had done to their dear mother earth,
Pock-marked and bleeding, suffocating and searing,
You saw all these faces and eyes and bright places,
The universe, and time, and one poor tragic planet:
What would you do if the cancer was you?

And if you could see — if you can bear with me! —
If you could see all of the faces before you,
If you could look into their full expectation,
Knowing that you were part of the problem,
Knowing that all of us hurtle to death:
Personal death, planetary death,
All of the people — yes all of the people! —
And didn't do nothing, did not stay the course,
Did not shy away, did not run away,
There's nowhere to run from this speck in the universe,
But helped turn the tide — helped them to survive —
Then you, my friend, deserve to be human.