



Across the Waters of Time:
Pliny Remembered

A novel by Ken Parejko



Author, naturalist, cavalry officer, friend of the emperor Vespasian and admiral of the Roman fleet Pliny the Elder remembers his life from childhood to his death in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, a full life lived at the center of seminal times. Struggling to save a medicinal herb from extinction, Pliny finds a guide to the afterlife and a late romance. What he recounts of his life is strikingly relevant to our own times.

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A novel

Ken Parejko

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*Fortunate indeed is the one to whom the gods
have granted power to do something worth recording,
or to write what is worth reading.*

*Most fortunate of all is the one who can do both.
Such a man was my uncle.*

Pliny the Younger, in a letter to Tacitus

Chapter 1

The Bay of Naples

Aug. 24, 79 C.E.

*And you wait, are awaiting the one thing
that will add infinitely to your life;
the powerful, the extraordinary, when stones
awaken and the depths turn towards you.*

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Remembering*

The Mare Nostrum, stirred as it was by the palsied hand of the earth, came at us in mountainous swirling swells, one after another, larger then larger and there was no telling from what direction.

We climbed again, against all odds foot by brutal foot upward, hard pull by hard pull when topping the swell the big Liburnian paused, shook itself, surrendered to its next feral downward slide.

Clutching the rail I retched, again. Admiral or not I had no more control over my stomach than of the mountain, or the sea.

The thin stream of bile burned in my throat, already scorched by the hot and bitter air. Around me the world rose and fell and tumbled and rose and fell and tumbled again. Now all the learning, the knowing of so many things and the remembering and the writing of them all meant nothing. Now even Titus, friend and emperor, could not help me. And Caecilius, who I love more than myself, thankfully left behind at the admiralty, could not reach to help me. It came down to these motley forty who would bear themselves and me to safety or would this be our common ship of death?

So they pulled and pulled, and groaned and pulled, and lifting my face up from the rail to face the onslaught of sea and sky, I thought: they would pull now with only one arm, or legless or if like a diving sea-eagle we should plunge beneath the next crashing swell, as obediently pull under the waves as over them.

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The sky too was sick, vomited over us a dark smoky shower of ash and rocks still hot from the bowels of the earth, which when they hit the sea hissed like stone-struck serpents.

The earth too, our magnanimous tutor, was sick and angry, fed up with mankind's abuse. It lifts us, I thought, and shakes us to stir us from our ignorance.

The wind swirled, its sudden squalls pushing us this way then that. The men cried out as they pulled, cried to one another, to me and to the angry sea and the fates which seemed to have deserted them. The din of their voices joined the roar of the sea and beyond it the hidden angry mountain.

Turn back, someone yelled, why in Hades name don't we turn back!

Then first-mate Marius' thick Egyptian accent: Stop your damned complaining you lazy bastards and pull!

Staring ahead through the tossing sea in hopes of catching a glimpse of beach or Vesuvius' high crown only made me queasier. I turned to focus on the flackering sails and mayhem of men and oars which was the dire imprimatur of our fate. They worked the oars with the determination of the damned; here and there one or two who'd given up lay sprawled over the deck, supine in fear. Suddenly hit by falling pumice one cried out, dropped his oar and clutched his head. Nearby a pair clutched each other, oars resting in their laps, their faces masked with dust-clotted cloths, terror shining from their eyes, dumbly watching the catastrophe unfold.

But Lucius, faithful old Lucius, sat still at my feet, clutching pen and papyrus, as he had all these years ever-ready for the next wave of dictation.

It seemed days or even weeks ago, time was so confused, yet it had been only hours since Plinia awakened me from my afternoon nap.

There's an angry cloud going up from Vesuvius, she said. Come and see!

So as I do I puffed and wheezed my way up the Cape for a better look. It was true, from the mountain's summit a cloud of black smoke and dust grew high into the sky like a huge pine tree, its branches stretching each moment farther out over the Bay. Small explosions threw rocks and ash from the mountain's mouth as the pine leaned closer toward me. I thanked the earth then for the gift of studying an eruption up close, huffed down the path back to the admiralty and ordered the fleet's fastest Liburnian readied. I

asked Caecilius if he'd join me but Fortune smiled on us both when he chose to stay with his mother.

Dragging old Lucius along I hurried down to the harbor, where a crowd had already gathered to stare and chatter over Vesuvius' show. I had one foot already on the ship when a courier breathlessly brought me a letter. It was from Rectina, the widow of Lucilius Bassus who I'd first met while fighting in Judea, and who was killed retaking Masada. Rectina was living out her years in Herculaneum and just a week ago had come over for a visit when we'd laughed and talked over old times. She and Plinia were close friends. Ever-thoughtful as she always was Rectina had brought Caecilius another new marvel, cast in bronze, from the workshops of Pompeii.

My dear friend Pliny, she'd scribbled onto a wax-tablet. Come quickly. There are thousands stranded on the beach. Bring as many ships as you can.

So as I waited impatiently for the fleet to assemble I watched the mountain's growing anger. At last we cast off, twenty tiny ships in a long line out of Misenum's calm harbor to sail, in a great, angry sea, straight toward disaster.

What choice did I have?

You can find it, if you want, in the first chapter of my *Natural History*:

Deus est mortali iuvare mortalem.

What utter silliness, all these gods! So many -- who could believe in any one or handful of them? No, if there be a God, it is nature herself, the earth and all its creatures, and mankind and all our thoughts and deeds. So it came to me suddenly one night working in my study: *God is people helping people.*

Then as we headed eastward, twenty ships in a swelling sea, the mountain disappearing behind its own veil of smoke and ash, I remembered good old Vespasian's warning. Be careful, he said. They'll put you on a pedestal, like they've done to me then they'll swallow whatever you write and cough it up again. Mark me, he'd said, one day you'll hear your own words bantered in the marketplace. And once again he was right. Just weeks after my encyclopedia was published I was at Ostia on my way to visit Titus, when I overheard a centurion: *Deus est mortali iuvare mortalem*, as though it were the gods themselves speaking.

At first I'd smiled, then almost cried.

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And as I clutched the tossing rail I remembered that yesterday the Volcanalia had begun: in Rome's Forum yesterday at dawn's first light they'd taken the stone *mundus* from the opening to the underworld, allowing the dark chthonic powers to escape and swarm over our world. *My God*, I thought...

The smoke grew thicker, the ash pouring down on us now like driving rain. I knew the fleet was somewhere out there in the dust and ash, but I couldn't see even one. I was just thinking that at any moment a ship could suddenly appear and after crashing into each other we'd both go under when a fishing-boat, small and vulnerable and running as fast it could away from the disaster, suddenly appeared and passed so close I could almost reach out and touch it. For an instant, before it was lost again in the maelstrom, its handful of passengers were revealed to me, faces full of fear. "Go back!" They shouted, waving frantically. "Turn around!" Then they were gone, like premonitory wraiths from a confused dream.

Turn around?

Yes, it was worth considering wasn't it, this turning around.

And so I considered it, ran it past the analytics I'd cobbled together many years ago which Vespasian and I fine-tuned when he became emperor, and I'm proud to say, we applied to the rebuilding of the empire. Simplicity itself, it goes like this: gather up as many facts as you can find, prioritize them by relevance and credibility, then use them to chart whatever course of action reaps the greatest benefit for the greatest number.

The facts, raining down on us from the sky and rising up at us from the tossing, darkening sea, were far too relevant, and screamingly credible. Our present course was leading us straight into disaster. From the bottom of the sea we could be of no use to anyone. Ergo, the first thing was to save ourselves.

Hard as it was, I had for the moment at least to abandon Rectina to the Fates.

But I would not turn us into full retreat.

Instead we would make for Pomponianus' villa, not far up Stabia's beach. Going that way would take us away from the mountain, into clearer air and a safer sea, yet leave us close at hand should the air clear and we become of use.

"Now! Everyone!" I shouted. "Hard to starboard! Towards Stabia!"

I didn't have to tell them twice. They clutched the oars, pulled with all their strength, and slowly, but surely, the ship turned.

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Only as we turned the high swells could catch us broadside, and work at capsizing us.

“Tack the swells!” I yelled. “For God’s sake quarter them!” My lungs and throat burned from all my shouting and I could barely breath.

Aimed now as we were toward safety, I forced my eyes closed and for a moment rested my aching body.

Chapter 2

A moment later when the sea's anger abated and the air cleared we could see to dodge the fleet of ships full of refugees streaming westward. The swells lessened, the ship gave up its wild tossing, we made good headway. Catching sight of the beach, crowded with a frightened flotsam of mankind, a shout of joy rose from my men.

The Liburnian swung to face the swells straight on. The bow grounded and the ship settled in fifty feet from shore.

"Everyone to shore," I shouted. "Rest first and we'll see what we can do." I struggled over the side then foot by foot down the boarding ladder into waist-deep water and waded through low tossing waves onto the beach, where to my surprise Pomponianus stood, himself astonished to find me tossed like flotsam onto the sand.

"Pliny!" he shouted. "What the devil you doing here?"

I tried to answer but fell into a fit of coughing. Finally clearing my throat I spat a dark paste into the surf. "I've brought the fleet to help. How are things?"

"OK so far, thanks to the wind." Pomponianus took my hand. He was a tall, thin man, still handsome, his eyes, always clear and bright, now set deep in dusty sockets. "But the gods are not smiling on Pompeii, or the other villages along the shore."

It was true. Now I had a clear view of the mountain and watched as she dropped great tears of ash over the villages at her feet, orange rivers of fire streaming down her thighs. Then I remembered Drusilla and could only hope she'd stayed at Cumae and not come down to visit her son at Pompeii.

I'd always admired Pomponianus for his athletic build. But he seemed exhausted, and sat on a nearby chest. There were a dozen big chests, piles of lamps, plates, clothes and paintings scattered on the beach.

One of his men towed fine grit off Pomponianus' forehead. "I'm sending my valuables to Surrentum. Do you think the boats can get through?"

"I think so. It's away from the cloud."

"And you?"

I coughed again, could feel my throat closing, and the drawing of each breath became like lifting a big stone from a deep well. I had an idea. “You know, a bath would be just the thing. Clear my lungs and let my skin breathe.”

“A bath?”

“We’re both filthy with dust and sweat. It’s the best thing for us.

“But if the wind...”

“If the wind changes, there’s always our boats.” I held my hand out and helped him up. He directed half his servants, gathered around in anxious knots, to load his things onto his fishing-boats and take them to Surrentum, the other half to follow us.

I told my men to help ferry as many as they could to Surrentum, too. Leave their things, I said, take only them and what they can carry. Then come back for us.

I headed up the beach through a chaos of humanity, faithful Lucius following. Now, though the air still reeked of sulfur, my breathing eased.

“The house is a mess,” Pomponianus apologized. He’d been frantically sorting his possessions, deciding what to save, what to leave. As we entered we had to step over thrown piles of clothing, utensils, lamps and candlesticks, vases, sculptures and bedding.

We headed straight to the tepidarium. Two of his men slathered us with oil then worked the strigils over our skins, scraping off thick layers of sweat and grime. We padded into the hot bath. It was just what we needed. Here was a refuge from the catastrophe outside. Small-talk helped. Pomponianus inquired about my studies. I set off telling him about my *Flora of Campania*, bored him I’m sure with intimate details about the more interesting plants I’d collected and my new theories about why they were found where they were. Only now and then, when we could feel the floor shift beneath us and the bathwater set up tiny waves, were we reminded that this was no ordinary afternoon spent relaxing in the company of good friends. I hesitated but decided anyway to tell him about Drusilla’s visit, and our trip to Cumae.

“You mean the Judean Drusilla?” Pomponianus asked. He seemed surprised.

“Have you met her?”

“No but of course I’ve heard of her.” Whatever he thought of her, he kept to himself.

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He'd had what seemed to me a long happy marriage, became a widower only a year ago. "Well my friend," he said. "Good. It's about time you found yourself a woman."

I'd heard it before, only lately it seemed closer to the truth.

"Do you think so?"

We closed our eyes and for a while forgot the day's troubles. I followed Pomponianus into the bracing frigidarium, which as it does made me feel fully alive. A quick massage and we slipped into clean togas and made our way to the dining room, the air still rich with sulfur. Alone, our fears might have gotten the better of us. But in each others' presence we felt surprisingly at ease. What would come, would come, and so we calmed each other, reclined to eat and talk politics. We agreed that Titus seemed only too ready to squander the money, political capital and reputation his father had gone through so much trouble to build up.

Evening came and it grew darker outside. Through the north-facing windows when now and again the wind parted the dust-clouds and falling ash we saw flashes of flame bursting out of the angry mountain's summit along with many smaller fires up and down her side. The servants, who could not control their anxiety, watched with us, and muttered that the fires were the flames of the underworld, come to devour us. I assured them they were likely house-fires out of control when people had abandoned their hearths. Only now the fires seemed to be sliding down the side of the mountain, toward Herculaneum, ribbons of molten metal like the fiery tongues of the dogs of fate lapping up everything in their way.

"Shouldn't we make a break for it?" Pomponianus asked.

But it seemed to me that with food and water, and a roof to protect us, it was safer to stay.

I'd written about everything, including great storms, earthquakes, volcanoes and other freaks of nature and so much to my embarrassment I was considered an expert on just about everything. So they deferred to my judgment. We told the servants we'd spend the night there in the villa, and they must all try and get some sleep. We wished each other a good night's rest and separated. I've always been a good sleeper, when I put my mind to it. A few hours a night is all I need, but when I want it, there it is. I drifted off, though visited by vague and discomfoting dreams. Drusilla was there, and Plinia and Caecilius, too, trying to warn me of something. In another Drusus came to me, as he had years before. Only now his image flickered in and out of focus, and this time I could barely hear what he was saying. Only again, something about the Orphic Hymns.

It was already dawn when I was awakened by one of the earth's loud groans, though in my dream-mind it was Drusus who groaned, mortally wounded in the deep forests of Germany. I raised myself erect and padded out into a strange new world, full of dust and ash and wailings natural and unnatural. Ashes lay almost knee-deep in the peristyle, and the ground shook now and then like a ship in uneven seas.

Pomponianus, refreshing himself with a light wine, could offer me no reassurances. He'd slept fitfully, he said, until awakened by his servants, who recounted the night's events.

"While you were snoring away," he said, "they were too afraid to sleep and one by one made their way back into the dining room, huddling together and muttering prayers to all the gods they could think of. Now and then the earth shook, and when it shook they said it groaned hideously. And sometimes, they said, from the direction of the angry mountain came an eerie wailing, as though the earth were in the pangs of birth, or death.

They told me they paced the rooms and stared at the villa's walls, as though by watching them they might keep them from crashing in.

In the middle of the night the wind had changed, bringing a steady rain of ash, then stones, ever larger and larger, bumping onto the roof, setting up a devilish rattle. Outside the ash and stones began to pile up, in places knee-deep or deeper, filtering down into the impluvium and building up in gray dusty drifts around the peristyle, the air growing thicker and thicker. Convinced it would soon be impossible to leave, they began to panic.

Towards morning they'd asked Lucius to wake you so you could tell them what to do, he said. But instead Lucius told them that the Lord would care for them, his Lord, and anyway if you saw them you'd only scold them for being so afraid.

So they huddled in the dining room, covering from the building's creaks and groans, peering now and then out the window to watch the ash grow deeper and deeper. After what seemed almost an eternity night gave way to dawn. But as you can see it is an unearthly dawn, full of the smells of the underworld, and dark with an ominous light."

I was still wiping my face of the dust that had settled on it while I slept when one of the servants ran up to us. "Sir, master," he said. "We must go. Now!"

"Why?"

"Duiilius saw all the mice running from the building. He said it means it's about to collapse."

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It was said horses and dogs could predict earthquakes, so maybe there was something to it. Our position really did seem to have grown desperate. The servants, their wives and children huddled around them, waited for my instructions.

I noticed a pretty blue iris half-buried in ash in the peristyle. I bent over and dusted it off.

“I gave you this, didn’t I? A decade ago. More.” Now it stood in simple beauty surrounded by what seemed the wreckage of the world itself. And for a few moments, while I touched the flower and turned it this way and that, and told them of all the different kinds of irises I’d found in Cyrenaica I had them rapt, and for those few moments we all forgot our peril.

But at last I straightened myself, bones creaking and sore, breathing heavy and coughing thick sputum, and walked through ankle-deep ash to the nearest window. I pushed the shutter open and poked my head out. I could barely see twenty feet through the blizzard of swirling ash, which the winds were piling up along the building in deep drifts. “Yes,” I had to admit, “perhaps it’s time we go.”

Rocks continued to pound away on the roof. Escape wouldn’t be easy. But if we stayed the ash and rocks might pile so deep we couldn’t leave, imprisoning us in the house. And if the barrage continued, or if the earthquakes didn’t let up, the roof and walls could cave in, and that we couldn’t survive. As we talked the earth shuddered, shaking the walls of the room, knocking dishes and utensils off the walls and shelves. The servants screamed. It was time to go.

We gathered pillows and tied them on our heads. Though dawn had come an hour before, it seemed now to be growing darker. Servants ran and found torches, one end soaked in pine-pitch, which they lit and passed around, and we streamed one by one out the door into the mayhem and down toward the sea.

Half-blind we plowed clumsily through knee-deep ash. Through the cloths which covered their faces the servants muttered, cried, sometimes screamed. Several women clutched infants. They insisted I lead the way, and overweight and asthmatic as I was I struggled to cut a path for them. Once or twice when I got headed off in the wrong direction Pomponianus had to turn me back towards the sea.

The rocks and ash were hot now, as though on fire.

An older man following Lucius, one of Pomponianus’ servants, fell and cried that he could go no further. Lucius, as old as he, lifted him and

dragged him along. We paused a moment to pass around a jug of water, our mouths caked with dust and pumice, our eyes stinging from the sulfur and fine dust which filled the air. It seemed an eternity since we'd left the villa. The seashore, our only hope of escape, was out there somewhere. We might all collapse before we found it. But it was too late to go back.

Then when it seemed even hope had abandoned us we stumbled onto the beach, crowded with people plowing this way and that, looking for boats or any way out. Just up the beach a small cargo-ship had grounded in the sand with a score or more of men struggling to push it back into the water. Just as it seemed they'd forced it clear a great roller lifted it out of their hands and threw it back onto the shore.

The servants panicked, all except Lucius, who stood bravely with me and Pomponianus, caught between the sea and the land, unable to go in either direction but unwilling yet to give up.

"There's a ship leaving!" Someone cried out and ran up the beach, followed by half of Pomponianus' servants. But when they got to it they saw that it, too, was deeply grounded and going nowhere.

I stumbled in that direction, leaned against the ship's side and closed my eyes. Someone tossed down a sail, torn and ash-covered, which Lucius rigged to provide a fragile roof, then spread a smaller canvas for me over the hot sand. After leading them this far, I could go no further.

Lucius stayed with me, and the old man he'd half-carried. They helped me find a spot to collapse onto under the canvas roof. Pomponianus knelt beside me. We'd been friends for many years. "Are you okay?" he asked, holding my hand.

"Yes, I'm all right," I said, though my voice was thin and barely audible. "Just tired."

Lucius sat under the canvas, leaning against the ship, and took my head into his lap.

"Should I stay with you?" Pomponianus asked.

"No, no, go look for help," I waved him off. My eyes closed, my body wracked with cough.

"All right. I'll head up the beach. If I find help, I'll be back."

All I could do was nod.

No more had he left when a bitter, biting sulfurous cloud settled over the beach, wrapping us in its evil arms as we huddled under the sail. We coughed and gagged, barely able to breathe the foul, acid air. I peered around. Never before had I felt such deep confusion. Only I remembered

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that when Vespasian lay dying he'd asked those around him to stand him up. "A man should die standing," my old friend had said.

I managed through wheezing breaths to ask Lucius to help me.

It was a struggle but good old Lucius finally got me up. It was like standing on a swaying deck. I could barely keep my balance. He held me as best he could. I looked around, and couldn't believe that the earth I so loved was taking from me all the many treasures it had so readily yielded me over the years. I felt alone, more alone than I'd ever felt, as though even my own mind was abandoning me and fleeing who knew where. I tried to speak, but could offer Lucius no more than a short smile of gratitude.

Then I felt my legs give way and I watched, perplexed, as the sand rushed up to meet me.

Chapter 3

Near Mogontiacum (Mainz), Germany

June 23, 47 C.E.

In the Roman calendar, jubilee year 800

*Even scientific physicians tell us that one
should pay attention to dreams.*

Aristotle Propheying By Dreams

The voice came from a quiet glade.

“Pliny!” the voice said.

Me. My name.

Cutting through the glade a small impetuous stream; above and all around, the fiery flash of gold scintillae, light dancing butterflies. One swept higher, crossed the stream and into the woods where its glinting golden wings suddenly flashed into a shining gladius’ arc. As the sword swung a man’s voice, solid as a boulder in the stream of light, flushed all the golden standards into a sudden final flurry, and they were gone.

“Pliny!” the voice repeated.

Me...?

“Yes, you,” the voice said.

Suddenly an officer striding confidently down the stream, short swings of his sword blithely parting the weeds.

I ask myself: who? But then I knew. Drusus.

We’d never met, of course. Thirty years was Drusus dead before I even was. But across the empire Drusus’ image, more than any other, on bronze busts and silver coins, in temples and in markets, marched and marked the pax romana.

Drusus, surely: this the strong face, imperturbable, this the exalted hero. Yes, Drusus.

While underneath, another knowing, a deep dream-knowing.

“Drusus!” my own voice said, a voice which frightened me, a hollow sound, as though shouted up from a deep well.

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The great general splashed up the shallow stream, creaking bronze greaves, lamellae of his cuirass flashing. He smiled, stopped beside a boulder, re-sheathed his sword, and sat.

"I've come to haunt you, my friend," Drusus said, settled himself onto the rock. His eyes were his mother Livia's, intelligent, full of deep faith in himself, child-like, intuitive. "I need you," Drusus' voice said, or was it the call of that crow there, staring, smirking?

A legend before me, perched on stone. Drusus. Then my father's voice from across the years, in quiet evenings I thought forever past, the careful cadence of homespun Latin, working and reworking like the cud of a sheep Drusus' fated story. I'd lain mesmerized then, as a child, the same rich reverent voice father used in prayer. In life Rome's finest, in death Drusus became the ever-victorious hero: in death, a legend. A god, almost. Daily from temples smoke rose in Drusus' memory; and with it, rose all Rome.

Behind him a wall of trees and farther still a steep rocky cliff rising craggy with vine and shrub. The sudden, sharp cry of a bird. Silence again, deeper. Only the sound of the water. Did he say something? From his rock Drusus smiled, silently mouthed the words, gestured with his sword. *Ita, tu!*

"Yes, you!"

He leaned, picked a small shard of yellow, as though a spark fallen from the fluttering papiliones, turned it lazily in his hand. The yellow took familiar form: an umbel of skirret. Why how silly, it's only skirret: Tiberius' favorite, fried with vinegar and silphium. Then I knew. Germania. Of course, right here, in Germania.

"How long since I died?" Drusus asked.

An odd question to be asking, I thought.

"Fifty-five years."

Drusus, half a century dead, smelled the flower. "I fell from my horse..." He struggled to remember. The forest darkened for a moment.

"Yes, you fell. You bled."

"Yes, I remember." The sun broke free. "On Papilione. We were two wings, Papilione and I, and flew like the wind." A driving breeze came up and through us, and for an instant a dizzying giddiness. "But, then...Yes, now I remember. I died, here at Mogontiacum."

"Rome's sweetheart."

"Yes, I was," with twinkling eyes.

"You civilized the tribes."

Drusus smiled ironically, spat. "Ah yes...the pax romana! We make a desert, you know, then call it peace."

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“Like a great wind you swept them before you, the Chatti, Usipete, Raetians. While the Senate, huddled in the Comitium, awaited couriers from the north with word of your victory. Then all Germany would be ours, and Augustus' nightmare at last redeemed.”

“Ah, the Senate! The Senate, the Senate.” Drusus' head swung from side to side. “Swilling bunch of swine stuffing their guts pausing now and again to sniff the air, thick with the smell of death... Mine, that is, and my men.” He smiled a sardonic smile, spat into the stream. “Still, it's true. I almost did. Germany might have been ours.”

“It would have, if you'd lived.”

“Do you think so?” He settled into the stone, glanced skyward toward the cascade of light falling unabated upon us. “Perhaps. I chased them into lands never touched by Roman foot.”

He paused a moment, ran his hand over his leg, torn with a deep wound. “I was surprised, you know, the emptiness of a triumph. But by then, part bear, part boar, part wily crow, I was more at home here. I despised the capitol and her petty triumphs, looked inside myself and found the heart of a barbarian. Does that shock you?”

“Not really. So you escaped here, into the wilderness, and death.”

“Yes...”

“Choosing to court death over victory.”

“Choosing?” Drusus thought a moment. “Have you been here, in winter?”

“No. Only since spring.”

“And your native land?”

“Novum Comum, on Lake Larius.”

“Ah, yes. It's lovely. Went for a moonlight swim there, long ago...How long ago it seems! Does the water get hard there, in the winter?”

“Yes. Sometimes...Not often.”

“Have you ever walked on it?”

A child, a cold December morning. I run to the lake's edge, cloak flapping like wings. The water is smooth, at the shore covered with clear, sparkling ice. I stoop, with two hands lift a stone and drop it onto the ice. The stone leaves a scar, skids sideways.

Gingerly one foot onto the ice, then the other. The lake moans but pushes back. I stand looking into another world. A minnow swims under me. I see myself through the fishes' eyes, an Olympian towering high above. I take a step, nearly fall. Now another, more carefully, and suddenly I am

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running, wooden boots clacking across the ice. I laugh, shout. "I am the wind!"

It was incredible, this running on water. I'd never forgotten it.

"That hard water, dear Pliny, that is Fortuna. You run like the wind across its surface, your life a graceful swoop and climb, but at any moment there you are, suddenly, under water."

Now the ice was gone, the lake a shimmering mirror. A boat, a tiny box, falls out of the sky, settles onto the lake. Aulus' boat. Little Aulus, under the sea, Aulus under the earth.

"What's it like, in your world?" I asked, Aulus' world?

"There are many lives; one at the surface, the one you live, but many others. Always be ready for that other journey. Death finds us many times while we're still alive, a thousand tiny deaths we're too busy to notice. But there is one death from which there is no return," and here he sighed, "and that is, after the last, great dying, then to be forgotten. The household manes, the ancestral shrines, the daily prayers; it's what keeps us alive. That is the genius of our people. It's not our heroes or generals or the legions that make us strong, you know, but the knowing that we need each other, you and I, the living and the dead."

He paused a moment. "It's what brought me here, out of this wilderness my spirit calls home, and believe it or not, it's what brought you here too, beside this stream we call Copia. I've come to ask your help, my friend, to keep this my insubstantial shade from fading to oblivion. There's little else left of me, only a few ashes and those god-awful unlikenesses, in silver and stone, soon to make way for another crowned hero."

For a moment, it seemed as though the spirit of Drusus did fade, and almost flicker away. Then it came afire again, full of strength and glory and straightforwardness. "So it falls upon you, my dear friend, to save me."

"Me? But..."

Our eyes merged, and deep inside each other, we found ourselves. "I've come from over the years to ask you a favor, to ask you to write a history, of the part I played in the German wars."

"The German wars? But..."

Drusus stood, for an instant tall as a tree, and with a sweep of his hand gestured me quiet. "Hush! Only listen. You're right here in Germany, as I was. Fortune has blessed you with the keenest of eyes, a quick mind, a miraculous memory and a fluid pen. At your age, why who's ever heard of it, your manual for throwing the javelin is already standard issue across the empire. You have a great life ahead of you, my friend. You'll travel the

known world, witness battles that make these German skirmishes child's play. You'll know things, and record things no one else has known or recorded. You will, in time, become the mentor and conscience of the emperor. Only," and here he looked me straight in the eye, "only, when you run across the hymns to Orpheus, as you surely will, remember me, and this dream."

The winds of the future swirled my head. And what was this about the Orphic Hymns?

"It must be you, dear Pliny, there's no one else can do it, or do it so well." Drusus' eyes moved first across the sky, then down to his feet. "Fortune denied me the gift of longer life, or I'd been emperor. Once emperor my place in history, the solace of my soul, would have been settled. Then I would not need you. But that was not to be..." He paused, took a deep breath. "You're my best chance at eternity. You'll do it?"

"Do what?"

"Write the German wars."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Pretend you do, if it helps."

Drusus stood, stretched, scratched the edge of his ugly leg-wound with his sword. "Well, I'm off then. Who knows to where. You're my new Papilione now, dear Pliny, I'll ride you into the future. Thanks to you, two thousand years from now, in unimaginable times and places, someone will sit beside a fire with a glass of wine and remember me. And thanks to you, and thanks to them, I will still live."

For a moment the great general's image brightened, like oven-coals in a draft. Then he hefted his sword to his shoulder, winked conspiratorially and headed off upstream, splashing casually across the stream and singing a common battle-song. Then he was gone, and all was silence.

I tried to speak, to call him back, but could not find my voice.

I stared a moment where he'd been. The woods there seemed to have lost their color, as they do when the sun leaves the day. Now, without the general, the flashing butterflies or noisy birds, the glade was full of a new and heavy emptiness. Suddenly I felt lonely, and the silence of the forest felt thick and deep. I struggled against it, felt myself smothering, as though I'd fallen through the stream of silence, and was drowning in an unseen liquid.

Now I could hear myself breathing, my own wheezing and gasping.

"Pliny!" A voice called out. The forest grew darker. I could not recognize the voice. I struggled to find it.

"Pliny!" The voice called again, closer this time.

I opened my eyes. From out of the darkness Lucius leaned over me, the candle he held flashing yellow and gold, like the wings of a dream. I rubbed my eyes, tried to blink them awake.

“Almost dawn,” Lucius said, setting the light beside me. “You were gasping.”

“Yes,” I had to admit, drawing long, deep raspy breaths. I looked around, found myself in my field-tent. “I could hardly breath.”

“Sometimes you sleep like a dying man.”

“I felt as though I’d fallen through the ice, and was caught under, in cold dark water.” My tongue stuck to my mouth, and the words did not come. For an instant Aulus’ eyes flashed up at me, eyes which visited me often.

“A bad dream?” Lucius asked.

“No, not bad.”

Lucius opened the wooden *capsa*, the traveling library which followed us everywhere, slipped into it from the nightstand Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*.

I swung my feet off the cot and onto the cold early-morning ground. “I dreamt of Drusus.”

“Drusus?”

“Yes. Claudius’ father.”

“Ah, well.”

“He asked me to write a history of the German wars, and the part he played.”

Lucius helped me with my coarse woolen tunic. “It’s quite an honor.”

“Do you think so?” I pulled the tunic down, sighed. “But I know so little of the German wars.”

“Surely you remember the stories, of Drusus and his son Germanicus, too. Today, you know, is his birthday.”

“Whose?”

“Germanicus!”

“Ah, yes, today.”

Lucius fussed over my tunic, his hands caring and familiar as he flattened it and tucked it in. “You should. Write the history, I mean. You’re the best man for it. I don’t know anyone reads like you. And if you sleep just half the night you complain about the waste of time.”

“Well, yes...”

“So if Drusus came to you in a dream, I wouldn’t think you should disappoint him.”

The water in the washing-bowl was cold on my face. Lucius handed me a cloth. "Do you believe, Lucius," I asked, as I took the towel, "that it's possible to escape one's destiny?"

"Oh, I think not," Lucius answered, bending to straighten the blankets on my cot.

"Is it possible, then," I mused, standing with the towel in hand, "that it's my destiny to try to escape my destiny?"

"That seems to be the fate of many," Lucius replied, with a small laugh.

"Well, is it possible I might succeed?"

Lucius was no match for me at these intellectual games. "If that is so, then that is what will happen."

"No, don't you see." I lay the towel over my arm, made a fist of my right hand, with the other hand uncurled the smallest finger. "That is exactly what won't happen." I uncurled a second finger. "You see, if it is my destiny to escape my destiny, then by escaping it I am merely ..."

I stopped mid-sentence. For an instant the two of us stared sheepishly at one another. I balled the towel and threw it at him. He caught it and with two swift motions folded and tucked it under his arm. Now and again without warning I would catch in him a glimpse of my father, who though some years older than Lucius shone sometimes with the same repressed vitality Lucius radiated. Then, for a moment, I would feel a small wave of nostalgia, and regret that father and I'd not once played like this.

I stretched my arms wide, yawned. "Well, as you say, if Drusus asked, I suppose I really should."

I strode to the tent's door-flap, stuck my head outside and peered around. "Come on then Lucius, what are you waiting for? The sun's coming up, and the day awaits us."



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