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“The Sacred Whispers” in James Salter’s “Akhnilo”

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Suppose that in the last quarter of the 20th century an ordinary American had something like a “mystical experience.” Suppose he heard and hearkened to the call of a being from “an order vaster and more dense than our own” [108]; a sort of “pioneer” [109], this visitor, a footsoldier or scout, a messenger, *angelos*, from Somewhere Else. The man—it could be a woman, but then it would be a different story—this man of course cannot be just anybody, a generic brand-x American; he must be somebody particular, with his own singular undistinguished history. Not a paragon, neither of Classical nor of Christian virtues. He’s a carpenter, say, “though he’d gone to Dartmouth and majored in history,” “thirty-four,” nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita minus one, with “thinning hair and a shy smile. Not much to say,” and mostly “he worked alone.” A man with “something quenched in him” that, “when he was younger,” “was believed to be some sort of talent, but he had never really set out in life, he had stayed close to shore” [105] (like most of us, most of the time). He’s married, has two daughters; his tall nearsighted wife is the daughter of a banker. He can acknowledge to himself that “His life had not turned out as he expected but he still thought of himself as special, as belonging to no one.” At one time he might have “become a naturalist. Something in him, his silence, his willingness to be apart, was adapted to that.” But “Instead he began to build furniture with a friend who had some money, but the business failed,” and “He was drinking” [107] and almost became an alcoholic. “That was long ago” and “His family had saved him, but not without cost” [108]. They live in a suburban house in Sag Harbor, on the north coast of Long Island. “He ha[s] never really gotten over his difficulty,” his wife knows; “He often woke at night, she would find him sitting in the kitchen, his face looking tired and old” [110]. That’s most, but not all, of the “exposition” intermittently folded into the seven or so pages of James Salter’s short story “Akhnilo.” The man’s name is Eddie Fenn, but except once, the story refers to him only by his surname.

The story begins this way, with a brief one-paragraph prose nocturne that offers a glimpse of the world that is already there before “In the darkness Fenn awakened” [104]. It’s something of a cliche to start a story with its protagonist waking up, waking into the world; but I think this one gets away with it, makes it new:

> It was late August. In the harbor the boats lay still, not the slightest stirring of their masts, not the softest clinking of a sheave. The restaurants had long since closed. An occasional

> car, headlights glaring, came over the bridge from North Haven or turned down Main Street past the lighted telephone booths with their smashed receivers. On the highway the discotheques were emptying. It was after three. [104]

Who's watching this world? I don't know. I've long thought the term "omniscient" falsifies what actually goes on in much third-person fiction: no narrator knows or tells "all"; so I'd like to call the point of view here "angelic." But "angelic" is a loaded term in this context, so just say the writer offers this nocturne to a reader without suggesting that any human consciousness *in* the story beholds it. Something like an establishing shot in a film. And this almost-still interval of time is rounded, enclosed as by parentheses between its almost parallel first and last sentences: "It was late August"; "It was after three": identical syllable-count, different syntax in the predicates, slightly but noticeably different rhythms. I'm not sure why I notice that; maybe just because in these few lines I know I'm reading sentences that, for all their plainness—something like what Joyce must have meant by "a style of scrupulous meanness"—they sound and feel carefully gauged; no two alike, not even the two that sound most nearly alike. Flaubert said it: "the sentences in a book must quiver like the leaves in a forest, all dissimilar in their similarity."

But already I'm too far into the text. Likely you could use an some orientation. First, about the writer. James Salter, born James Horowitz in New Jersey in 1925, graduated from West Point in 1945 with a commission in the US Army Air Force, and later flew more than 100 combat missions in Korea. While there he began writing fiction, and after his first novel, *The Hunters* (1956), met with some success, he resigned his commission and devoted himself to writing. He published two more novels, *The Arm of Flesh* (1961) and *A Sport and a Pastime* (1967), and also wrote several screenplays that were filmed, including *Downhill Racer* (1968). Between 1968 and 1972 he published five short stories, four in the *Paris Review*. Then, for almost a decade, while working on the novels *Light Years* (1975) and *Solo Faces* (1979) and more screenplays, Salter published no short fiction until "Akhnilo" appeared in the Autumn 1981 issue of *Grand Street*, in that magazine's first year. Raymond Carver and Tom Jenks included the story in their *American Short Story Masterpieces* (1987), because Carver admired Salter's fiction (he had used a passage from *Light Years* as an epigraph to his early small press collection *Furious Seasons* [1977]). It was one of half a dozen stories they selected from magazines rather than collections, and its appearance in that anthology is its only such appearance that I know of. I'd read all of Salter's novels between 1978 and 1980 but was not aware of his short stories, and it was in Carver and Jenks's anthology that I first read and admired "Akhnilo." Of course I soon bought and read Salter's first story collection *Dusk* (1988), which won the PEN Faulkner award.

An overview of the story may help too. So here is as short and clear a summary as I can manage for now. Wakened by a noise in the middle of the night, a man leaves his house to seek its source, a "voice" that seems to "call" from high in the gable-end of a nearby barn, uttering what he takes for "words" though they are unintelligible to him; as he comes nearer, the voice fades and falls silent, so now he can only go home again, trying to bear back with him the four "words" he distinguished, which seem of "infinite value" to him; re-entering his house, he meets his anxious wife, and the precious words dissolve, all but one that he frantically scribbles on a piece of paper, broken and grieving; his wife and one of his daughters try to comfort him.

I've omitted and generalized too much, and thus distorted and falsified the story. But even

stripped to these bare bones, I'd hope the story would appear to present an encounter with the supernatural, a "mystical experience." That it was written by a (secularized Jewish) American writer in the late 20th century makes it somewhat unusual. Soon after I first read it in Carver and Jenks's anthology I began often to assign it to my fiction writing students and once in a senior seminar I called "Discerning Goodness," where I first began to write about it. Doubtless "Akhnilo" has been read elsewhere in similar academic situations. But at least in published comments, it has not been read well, and perhaps this is somewhat not unusual. William Dowie, in his DLB article on Salter (1993) and, at slightly greater length, in his introductory book for the Twayne's US Authors series (1998), said it was about a man confronting his past, and that Fenn hears the sound or call of his abandoned dreams. Joyce Carol Oates, in a review-essay on Salter's career (2005), guessed it portrayed "mental disintegration" but admitted her "repeated readings" had "failed to decode" the story.

To clear the ground and further open my own reading of "Akhnilo," I want to address Dowie's and Oates's remarks in some detail. In his DLB article Dowie links "Akhnilo" with a very different story, "Lost Sons" (about a West Point class reunion), as stories that "focus on men confronting their pasts." "In the case of Dartmouth graduate Eddie Fenn in 'Akhnilo,'" he writes, "the past means failure to follow his dreams and make money. One evening he awakens to what he imagines to be the distant sounds of those dreams, but it is too late" [286]. Dowie seems to me almost completely to miss the story here: I find no clear evidence in the text that Fenn "imagines" the singular sound he hears to be the "sounds of [his] dreams," or that he in any way connects the sound to his past, about which the narrator does tell us some significant facts (and we might regard the thirty or so lines of exposition embedded in the narrative as Fenn's self-aware memories). The text mentions neither "dreams" nor any desire to "make money" (and given the likely location, Fenn must be making enough to live decently); it does say that Fenn's "life had not turned out as he expected," that "he carved birds, or he had," that "at one time, [he'd] almost become a naturalist," and that he'd gone into furniture-making "with a friend who had some money, but the business failed" [107]. "One evening" is too inaccurate, since "It was after three" when "In the darkness Fenn awakened" [104]. Sunrise in late August at Fenn's likely location would be shortly after 6:00 a.m.

Dowie's longer discussion in his book does not improve much on this. "Summoned by a 'sea of cries,'" he writes, "Eddie slides trancelike out of his bedroom window" [100]. But the "sea of cries" [105] is the ambient chorus of the night, and, from the start, Fenn has sought the source of some other sound coming through and defining itself against that background noise. When first "awakened," Fenn "thought he had heard something, a slight sound, like the creak of a spring, the one on the screen door in the kitchen" [104]. And when he has listened near a "narrow doorway where some stairs descended to the kitchen," from which he does hear "a faint thump" and then "another thump and a moan," which "was [his dog] Birdman falling to a different place on the floor" [104], then he stands near a window over "the rear porch" of his house and "gaze[s] out at the night" [105]. (The layout of this house is not entirely clear to me, but this must be a bedroom window close to "the narrow doorway" to the kitchen stairs, for in the story's final scene, when his wife approaches trying to calm and comfort him, Fenn "ran into the hall" [110].) While he stands "star[ing] from the open window,"

It seemed he was the only listener to an infinite sea of cries. Its vastness awed him. He

> thought of all that lay behind it, the desperate acts, the desires, the fatal surprises. [. . .] In ravenous burrows the blind shrews hunted ceaselessly, the pointed tongues of reptiles were tasting the air, there was the crunch of abdomens, the passivity of the trapped, the soft throes of mating. [. . .] As he stood there the sound seemed to change [. . .]. It seemed to separate as if permitting something to come forth from it, something glittering and remote. He tried to identify what he was hearing as gradually the cricket, cicada, no, it was something else, something feverish and strange, became more clear. The more intently he listened, the more elusive it was. He was afraid to move for fear of losing it. He heard the soft call of an owl. The darkness of the trees which was absolute seemed to loosen, and through it that single, shrill note. [105–06]

The listener here is decidedly Fenn the "almost [. . .] naturalist," who can think "of all that lay behind" the "infinite sea of cries." A moment later, Fenn hears "the sound" as "repeating and repeating itself above the rest" and "seem[ing] to be coming only to him" [106].

I suppose one might call Fenn's state of mind "trancelike," perhaps in the very intensity of his focused attention; but the passages just quoted (not unlike the rest of the story) suggest that Fenn is anything but "unconscious or insensible," in a "suspension of consciousness and inertness to stimulus; a cataleptic or hypnotic condition," "half-conscious or half-awake," in "a state of mental abstraction from external things" [OED, s.v. "trance"]. Rather, and again as might befit a man who had "almost become a naturalist," he seems preternaturally aware of "external things," hyper-conscious, acutely attentive and tremulously responsive to every "stimulus"; the tense syntax and rhythms of Salter's sentences create—or simply are—the rhythms of Fenn's attention and awareness.

Dowie's sentence continues, "and follows the sound to his barn" [100]. But the text reads "Far off among some pines was the gable of a barn" and "It [the sound] was coming from there" [106]. "Far off" and "some pines" and "a barn" imply this must be someone else's pines, someone else's barn (and I think this is not a minor point); to reach the barn Fenn "passed behind houses he hardly recognized from the back, through neglected yards" and "past empty sheds he had never seen" [108]. Dowie writes (and I fail to grasp the logic of the *and* that joins these clauses): "The story was anthologized in *American Short Story Masterpieces*, edited by Raymond Carver and Tom Jenks, and it does have an eerie, mysterious, and unrealistic quality that reminds one of John Cheever's classic "The Swimmer" [100]. It doesn't remind me—though perhaps the northeast coastal suburban setting resembles a Cheever setting. The story's fourth sentence begins, "An occasional car, headlights glaring, came over the bridge from North Haven or turned down Main Street" [104], which allows me to suspect the location is Sag Harbor, on the north shore of Long Island, less than seven miles from Salter's home in Bridgehampton, less than two miles (across a bridge) from North Haven. But Salter's story plays none of the surreal or Escheresque time-warp tricks that Cheever's does; and unlike Cheever's Neddy Merrill, when Fenn returns to his house, perhaps an hour after he leaves it, it's not empty, his wife and daughters are still there. Dowie praises "Salter's writing" as "flawless" [101]—and so it seems to me, too—but he seems quite simply to miss, or to ignore, the action presented, or created (made, not described, as Hemingway might have put it), by those "terse and telling" sentences, those "stunning" lines [101]. Perhaps, since his book intends just to introduce the writer and the work, and is so brief as to preclude close attention to it, he has left such discoveries to the reader who

goes back to the story.

Seven years after Dowie's book, in an essay for the *New York Review of Books* occasioned by Salter's second collection of stories *Last Night* (2005), Joyce Carol Oates made her bafflement explicit:

> In *Dusk* there's a perplexing story titled "Akhnilo" that tracks in microscopic detail what seems to be the mental disintegration of a man about whom we know little ("Eddie Fenn was a carpenter though he'd gone to Dartmouth and majored in history…. He had thinning hair and a shy smile. Not much to say"), a feat of writerly obscurity that repeated readings can't decode. [247]

As I've already shown, we do know more of Fenn than Oates's two-line excerpt suggests, and more of this protagonist's history than we get in many short stories. I much doubt that Salter meant to write, let alone publish, "a feat of writerly obscurity"; and coming from Oates this judgment seems oddly obtuse. As early as 1974 she had published a collection of essays, *New Heaven, New Earth*, on "the visionary experience in literature," and well before she reviewed Salter's career in this essay her volcanic ouevre had included "gothic," "supernatural," "ghost," or "horror" stories and novels, and she had published, with a discerning introduction, her own selection of the *Tales of H. P. Lovecraft* (1997), which she had been reading since her early teens. I don't mean to suggest that Salter's story is "Lovecraftian," only that it's surprising that a reader and writer so steeped in Lovecraft and other writers of "paranormal" fiction as Oates found herself unable to "decode" it.

Generalizing, Oates wrote that Salter's stories "unfold with dreamlike fluidity in an atmosphere of shadows and indistinct forms, like watercolors in a dark palette" [245], and she remarks how some of them "move so swiftly and disjointedly as to arouse expectation in the way of trailers for intriguing films that turn out to be the films themselves, abruptly truncated [. . .] as if the writer's imagination has leapt ahead of his capacity for, or interest in, the work of expression; an impatience with formal storytelling and chronological development" [246]; in others she notes the "abrupt and sometimes disconcerting leaps in time, sudden endings that bring the reader up short, like sudden steps in dreams, unforeseen" [246–47]. Some of this seems true of "Akhnilo," but hardly all. The story does "unfold with dreamlike fluidity in an atmosphere of shadows and indistinct forms"; but if it moves "swiftly," I wouldn't say "disjointedly" or with "abrupt" or "disconcerting leaps"; and its development is strictly "chronological," though briefly suspended by passages of exposition or memory. As for "formal storytelling," if that means beginning-middle-end, or conflict-crisis-resolution, I think "Akhnilo" fits that model well enough, with an ending no more "sudden" than many I've read. The principal "unforeseen" element in its ending is the appearance of Fenn's daughter Dena and a shift into her point of view in the long and complex second clause of its final sentence: "Suddenly he slumped to the floor and sat there and for Dena they had begun again the phase she remembered from the years she was first in school when unhappiness filled the house and her father clumsy with affection came into their room at night to tell them stories and fell asleep at the foot of her bed" [111].

To generalize still more highly than I like, I would call the "form" of this story a Quest; small-scale, to be sure, but complete enough, in its way, I would think, to satisfy an average disciple of Joseph Campbell. A Call draws the protagonist out of his "safe" home (not safe if

such a voice can call into it), across a Threshold (his own windowsill and porch roof) and into a Night Journey (through his neighbors' yards) in a world that seems to pulse with peril (the perennial savagery of insects, birds, rodents in a semi-rural suburb), to a Limit where, instead of a Battle or Blessing, there is only a withdrawal (does the Sacred always recede, even as it approaches?) that leaves him with an ambiguous Boon, four untranslatable "words" which, now in real peril of losing them, he tries to carry back, in a Return that is a catastrophe of loss, so the man is less at the end than when he set out, Master of neither World. This is not clearly a "happy" story. Yet in it a man did think "he was going to be redeemed" (from the ordinary failure of his plain life that "had not turned out as he expected"?). If construed as a Quest, There and Back Again, this story returns the Monomyth near to one of its supposed springs: our Night Life, in which Dream Is.

Perhaps Oates was on to something in her remark about "what seems to be the mental disintegration of a man" [247]. Still, for me anyhow, at most the story poses an unresolvable ambiguity, an undecideability: is Eddie Fenn simply "mad," or dreaming until that sudden shift at the end? or does Salter want me to think he "really" did answer a "real" call from another "order vaster and more dense than our own" [108], another world, extraterrestrial or even angelic? Suppose Salter doesn't know? wants me to decide for myself? Suppose, though a believer in the historical actuality of divine and angelic visitations, I can't decide? or don't want to? Suppose maybe all I can suppose (so far) is that (in this story at least) it may not be possible to distinguish Visitation from Madness, Transcendence (of what kind?) from Psychosis?

Say that the Quest is, if you abstract it highly enough, the "mythically" or "archetypally" specified Narrative Form of Human Experience As Such: "experience" in Levinas's "strongest sense of the term: a contact with a reality that does not fit into any a priori idea, which overflows all of them" [59]; the I called out toward the Other, thus disrupted or "dis-integrated" indeed, its nuclear cell-membrane broken into; the I being "taught." Could this be another way to name what Oates thought to call "mental disintegration"? Isn't this—or doesn't such language help to describe—what happens to Fenn in this story?

Consider. "In the darkness Fenn awakened" [104]: a prisoner in Plato's cave starts to become one of Heraclitus's "waking" ones? (One of the Fragments I've always remembered: "The waking have one common world; the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own." The "waking" supposedly are the enlightened lovers of wisdom who share the light of truth; the rest of us clods are dreamers trapped in our private, and privative, fantasies.) Pretty heavy. Threatens to make the story a philosophical allegory. Which always threatens when a reader brings a "vocabulary" to a story? Anyway. The active (though intransitive) verb "awakened" gives Fenn the agency here, the power, where Plato's prisoner has to be unchained and dragged toward the cavemouth. But: the next sentence tells us "He thought he had heard something, a slight sound, like the creak of a spring, the one on the screen door in the kitchen" [104]. This "thought" follows the waking; and that "had heard" says "something" Else, a Call from Somewhere Else, woke him: the agent underwent a "pathos," an "obligation"? Yet as the sentence goes on we follow it through the successive steps of Fenn's "subjectivistic" interpretation: from vague "something" to a more specific "slight sound," then through a simile, "like the creak of a spring," to, at last, that simile taken as located fact, "the one on the screen door in the kitchen" [104], as

Fenn entirely "naturalizes" the "something," domesticates it, brings it within the "totality" of what he already "knows," his own "dwelling," household. Yet also: he "places" the "slight sound" at a door: entrance/exit. Which may suspect the Stranger, unwelcome. Intrusion. Invasion. "Something" outside or "beyond" the agent's "possibility" or "can" (certainly, as the story will show, beyond his ken, and ours); Something or Someone uttering a Call, which yet might be answered "Here I am." And which begins to be answered thus when Fenn, after lying "there in the heat" next to "his wife [. . .] sleeping quietly," "wait[ing]" and "not mov[ing]" while "Several minutes passed," does "g[e]t up and [go] carefully to the narrow doorway where some stairs descended to the kitchen." "He stood there" [104]: Here I am. The "thump and a moan" he next hears are also domestic(ated): his dog "Birdman falling to a different place on the floor" [104]. A "different" that makes no difference, for this "place" is all Fenn's place, still. Though the next word, first word of the next paragraph, is, you guessed it: "Outside."

Moving through the text at this rate, sentence by sentence, I would keep you here all day. As my old math textbooks sometimes used to say, the remaining steps of this demonstration may be left to the student.

But I said this story presents something like a "mystical experience." What I meant is that I think ir fits rather well the paradigm W. H. Auden sketched in his 1964 introduction to the Signet Classic edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. "All experiences which may be called mystical," Auden explained, "have certain characteristics in common":

1. The experience is "given." That is to say, it cannot be induced or prolonged by an effort of will, though the openness of any individual to receive it is partly determined by his age, his psychological make-up, and his cultural milieu.
2. Whatever the contents of the experience, the subject is absolutely convinced that it is a revelation of reality. When it is over, he does not say, as one does when one awakes from a dream: "Now I am awake and conscious again of the real world." He says, rather: "For a while the veil was lifted and a reality revealed which in my 'normal' state is hidden from me."
3. With whatever the vision is concerned, things, human beings, or God, they are experienced as numinous, clothed in glory, charged with an intense being-thereness.
4. Confronted by the vision, the attention of the subject, in awe, joy, dread, is absolutely absorbed in contemplation and, while the vision lasts, his self, its desires and needs, are completely forgotten. [100]

In this context Auden distinguishes two kinds of "natural mystical experiences," which he calls "the Vision of Dame Kind" (of the plenitude of creatures) and "the Vision of Eros" (of the "splendor" of a single other person). In a similar but more elaborated description in his introduction to *The Protestant Mystics* (also in 1964), Auden lists two more kinds of "mystical experience" that, I take it, are "supernatural": "the Vision of Agape" [69–70] and "the Vision of God" [70–76].

In "Akhnilo" Eddie Fenn experiences something that separates itself out from the splendor of creaturely plenitude, that is not a vision of another person or of multiple persons (the Vision of Agape), but that is yet not clearly a Vision of God either; perhaps, as Fenn seems to

think, it was an encounter with some sort of messenger (*angelos*) or scout, a "nameless pioneer" [109] "from an order vaster and more dense than our own" [108]. Yet when Fenn steps too near, the voice stops—as a wild animal or bird might, as if this other being, on its part, were as wary as Fenn. In any case, Fenn seems clearly to have approached what Rudolf Otto called a "*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*," a mystery both fearsome and fascinating, that both repels and attracts. Certainly he experiences it as "given" and neither "induced" nor susceptible of being "prolonged by an effort of [his] will": at the story's climax, or at least at the limit of the quest, when, "in a kind of ecstasy he moved closer" to the barn, "instantly he realized it was wrong," and "the sound hesitated. He closed his eyes in anguish but too late, it faltered and then stopped. He felt stupid, shamed. He stepped back a little, helplessly"; and after that, "All about him the voices clattered. The night was filled with them. He turned this way and that hoping to find it, but the thing he had heard was gone" [109].

Perhaps Fenn's feeling "strangely receptive" [105], his "openness [. . .] to receive" this visitation, has been "partly determined by his age, his psychological make-up, and his cultural milieu." As clearly as he has not induced and cannot prolong it, he also is "convinced that it is a revelation of reality." Throughout, he has remained "conscious of the real world," and conscious that "the voice, *his* voice, pouring overhead," "was coming from somewhere in the ghostly wooden triangle" of the barn gable [108], intruding into the familiar world, "pushing everything else aside"; and when "he stopped trying to comprehend it and instead allowed it to run through him, to invade him like a chant," then "the sound altered and exposed its real core," and "he began to recognize it. It *was* words" [108]. Though after the climactic moment of his "ecstasy" and the voice's cessation Fenn does feel himself as "standing near the barn with the fragments of a dream one must struggle to remember: four words, distinct and inimitable, that he had made out" [109], he does not regard the experience as *merely* a dream; rather, as having bestowed on him something that, even in fragments, he has to protect and "carry [. . .] back" [109].

Auden's third and fourth "characteristics" of "mystical experience" also appear in "Akhnilo"—but perhaps (and this looks important) incompletely. For Fenn, the sound, though its source is never visible to him, its "voice" never seen as issuing from a body, is indeed "charged with an intense being-thereness," a "there" he locates precisely "in the whitish surface" of the gable [109]. And he seeks that source in "fear of losing it" [106] and "the fear of an explorer" [108], "terrified by its closeness" [108] yet unable not to try to approach. After its recession, when he returns to his house, he is "afraid something would happen, a dog would bark, a light go on in a bedroom and he would be distracted, he would lose his hold. He had to get back without seeing anything, without hearing anything, without thinking. He was repeating the words to himself as he went, his lips moving steadily. He hardly dared breathe" [109]. Both going out and coming back, Fenn seems persistently "absorbed" by the sound and largely forgetful of "his self, its desires and needs," except for the desire to draw near the source of the voice. He is momentarily aware of his nakedness or near-nakedness, when, standing by the open window, he feels "a drop of sweat [break] free and [run] quickly down his bare side," that "his hands [are] trembling," that "his act" of removing the window screen and stepping out onto the porch roof is "taking him where nothing he possessed would protect him, taking him barefoot, alone"; but as he pursues the "call" he becomes oblivious to his vulnerability, caught up in the "thrill" of the sense that "he was going to be redeemed" [107]. On his way he does feel "the earth [. . .] firm

and dry" [108], and having "pulled himself up" again to the porch roof he feels "the crumbling green asphalt [. . .] warm beneath his feet" [109]; but such moments of attention to his own body are intermittent and pass quickly.

Still: is it possible that Fenn's failure to achieve a "full" mystical experience—and I think that near-ecstatic moment when he comes too close and the voice falters and stops likely should be taken as a moment of climactic failure—stems from, or just is, his failure to forget himself entirely? Tallying his moments of bodily self-awareness I've claimed, I thought rightly, that these were intermittent, transient, not the primary focus of his attention. But they are there, and one might say they are moments of distraction from the vision. What then of his ultimate step too far? Taken in a condition of excessive desire for his own redemption? With too little reverence or awe for the voice that called him? Maybe.

If indeed the story presents a failed mystical experience, well, that might be the point: that we cannot get all the way to that vaster and more dense order that, in this text, seems to enfold our own; or that its messengers fear to meet us fully, notwithstanding what we suppose to be their greater powers; in any case, that full mystical experience is something an average late 20th century American man is incapable of. And that at least two presumably well-trained late 20th century readers were incapable of reading. Clearly I too am trying to make sense of some things that are just beyond my grasp.

I recall ancient tales that seem to warn us against the too-near approach of divinity. Apollo pursued Daphne, and her one escape from him was transformation into a laurel tree. Actaeon saw Artemis bathing and was torn to pieces by his own hounds. The Pentateuch sometimes expresses a similar caution. As Jacob returns from his nightlong wrestling match by the ford of Jabbok, he "called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" [Gen 32.30]. The implication is that he'd have expected not to live if he saw God face to face, and feels lucky, blessed, to limp away with his life. The LORD God later says to Moses: "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live" [Ex 33.20]. Encamped before Sinai while Moses was receiving "words" [Ex 20.1], the people of Israel "saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw *it,* they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die" [Ex 20.18–19].

That last line might stand as a sort of motto for "Akhnilo": "let not God speak with us, lest we die." A supernal voice does, as Fenn understands it, speak to him, though in words he does not understand and can at best try to remember and to carry back with him. But in the story's next to last, and heartbreaking, scene, when his awakened wife approaches him with her anxious concern, asking "Are you all right?" and "What is it, what is it?," all Fenn knows is that "The light was coming everywhere, pouring across the lawn"—the light of the next ordinary day of his life—and "The sacred whispers were vanishing" [110]. He loses all but one of them, the strange word that I suppose is the story's title. Even as diminished an experience of the sacred as Fenn has, appears finally devastating, or at any rate more damaging than Jacob's wrestle with the angel (or Yahweh himself) at Jabbok.

But what should I make of the odd transposition—"translation"? translatory shift?—of

point of view from the story's start to its end? Call that first paragraph "omniscient" if you like. But look at the ending: the last long clause is explicitly in the point of view of the young daughter, Dena, who enters the story by name and deed only on its last page, and whose vision of her father is the vision I am left with (except my memory of his strange night passage): her interpretation, her perhaps mistaken feeling that something known before is about to begin again, "unhappiness [in] the house" but also the comfort of her father's voice telling her and her sister bedtime stories, words in the dark before they slept. In this ending—in the end—I'm left in a point of view that is limited, human, knows less than I suppose I know of this night, but would know much more about her father, all that love, her particular love, could know. Has Salter done this simply because he can't think of any better way to end the story? Can I think of a better way? I doubt it. Salter must mean to yield the "transcendent" point of view of the beginning, first to the strained attention of a man who approaches a vaster "order" but cannot comprehend it, then finally to the even more limited awareness of this daughter who does not know what has befallen her father. So is that yielding, that loss, which seems in its sequence somehow homologous (congruent? similar?) with the Quest itself—is that in the end a Loss or a Blessing? Loss that Is Blessing?

Am I here, now, on the verge of saying this is—this might be—the story of a man whose one strange action, a possibly "transcendent" search, in the middle of a late summer night in the middle of our life, destroys, or threatens to destroy, his capacity to act as husband and father, so that his one last hope of rescue, recuperation, lies with the spousal and filial tenderness of his wife and daughter? Has this man, who "still thought of himself as special, as belonging to no one," come now, by way of a mysterious call, to a place, his own place again, where he might begin to belong? Is that it? Is that what this story "says"? In every sentence here, as I draw back, abstract, generalize, I risk losing hold of the untranslatable word that is the story.

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