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Journey into Space
by
Toby Litt

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I

‘Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken . . .’

Keats, ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’

‘Describe,’ said Celeste, and so August began with ‘It is gentle and warm and soft and –’ And he ran out of adjectives. He rebegan with, ‘It is like being touched by the softest thing that has ever touched you but also like not being touched at all. It is a paradox.’ *Paradox* was too hard a word, though – it was hard to describe. ‘It is hard to describe,’ he said, ‘but it is softer than the word *paradox*. That sounds too harsh and makes it sound too complicated.’ He was getting lost. ‘I know I’m getting lost,’ he said.

‘No, you’re doing very well,’ Celeste said. ‘I don’t know if I could even begin to describe it.’ August was more than sure she could. ‘You can try,’ he said. ‘I’ll let you take over.’

‘But not today,’ she said. ‘Today is for you. Keep going – keep describing how it would be, if it were.’

But there was no next sentence in August’s mind – his eyes, he realized, were open: as if he might be able to catch sight of something earthly-ghostly in the darkness above. ‘You can smell all the smells of the park all around you – the trees smell of . . .’ This was atrocious; he knew nothing, really, about trees. He had been about to say *the trees smell of trees*. ‘They smell of their colours, green for the leaves and dark brown for the bark of the trunk.’ He knew *bark* and *trunk*; he did know something. The image in his head was that of an oak tree – he recognized it from one of the tattered

picture books he'd been given as a child and had several years ago been forced to pass on: a green cloud shape stuck on top of another shape like a foot seen from the front, in brown: *foliage* – a word he had recently learnt from *it*; a word he had wanted to display for Celeste, but now the moment was missed. Then he had an inspiration: 'All around you, you can hear the breeze brushing against the leaves of the trees.' He had studied equations for turbulence; he knew about this solidly. 'The air is becoming chaotic. Straight lines, if you could see them, are twisted and split and thrown back upon themselves. The sound you hear is the sound of those lines. But it is a soft sound, I think. Not violent.' Celeste, he knew, had also studied the equations, had sat beside him in class, which made this part of the describing seem suddenly pointless.

'That's beautiful,' Celeste said. There could be no doubt of it: she was crying.

'The grass underneath you is –'

'Enough,' she said. 'Enough-enough. Just let me *be* there for a little while. You've taken me. I'm here. I want to stay.'

August, still flat on his back, closed his eyes again and tried to untense all the muscles in his body: he wasn't there, where he'd described: Central Park, New York. He was the artist and had transported another person, but he remained excluded from the world of his words.

Perhaps next time. Perhaps when Celeste did the describing for him. Of one thing he was now certain: If this were to continue as it had begun, he must find out

as much as he could about the sensations of Earth. He must develop a vocabulary; one he was totally in control of, so that he was able to use any part, even when lost in panic – if the weather-moment required. He would ask *it* to show him what to read.

Beside him, Celeste gave a small sigh; she seemed to exhale other air – cooler than it went in, fresher, greener.

I need to know about Nature, August thought.

‘Describe,’ August said, the following year, and Celeste replied by saying, ‘It is so beautiful, just the idea of it – something which is *there* but which you can’t see, which touches you but leaves nothing behind. If anything, it *takes* – tiny flakes, tiny particles of us. I know we have lots of things here that are like that in some way, blowy things. But they can’t really be the same, or anything close, can they? It’s silent, unless it’s coming out of a vent. It doesn’t make any sound itself, crossing empty spaces high up between buildings or between trees – it only gains a voice when, as you once said, turbulence is suggested to it, created within it, by the edges of an object – the cornice of a building, say, or a hedge.’ August was overwhelmed by the idea of *cornice* and *hedge* – and even more so by the fact that Celeste had used these words. He knew what they meant, just about, but in her saying of them she had put the exact-crisp shapes of them in his mind. Now they hung above him in the flickering dark of the tennis courts. ‘I remember you did a wonderful describing of Central Park, of us just lying beneath the trees one sunny day in July or June.

All this breeze of mine, the whole wall-like force of it, well, it hits this tree and it is cut into tiny twirling ribbons of turbulence – all going in a million different directions, so complex that no person could ever map it or draw it. Or understand it. And it is this which creates the sound of the breeze. Can you hear it?’

‘Yes,’ August said, and he could. Celeste continued anyway. ‘This is an inhuman sound, even though it is frequently likened to a voice, or to voices. We must never forget our distance; although it is *like* something here, it isn’t really that thing at all. It is often compared to the sound of many people speaking quietly at once – of a whole vast crowd whispering; sometimes louder over here, sometimes quieter everywhere. But we will never hear the sound of a thousand people, and we will never hear the wind blowing, so we will never know.’

Celeste was often like this: rigorous to the point of destroying the effect she had only just created. August could have predicted what was to follow. With his eyes still closed, he could hear Celeste breathing in, tucking herself up, rocking herself back and then rolling up into a crouch before standing fluidly-fully and walking away. The tennis courts were so quiet, apart from the everywhere-hum, that the sound of each of these movements was distinct. ‘I’m not happy,’ said Celeste. ‘I’m just not good enough – and it’s ruining it for you, and that’s ruining it for me.’ After a year of good research, August knew quite well what *ruins* were. He liked the idea of ruins.

Celeste walked until she was perhaps ten metres away, then said, ‘Perhaps we should abandon it. All it

does it cause pain. Is torture what we want it for? Do we dislike ourselves that much?' These questions weren't for August, and he knew better than to try and answer them. If the moment went well, Celeste might make one of her magnificent speeches, saving everything that had almost been lost with a wordstorm so perfect it couldn't have been achieved without the preceding upset. But today, it seemed, wasn't to be one of those back-from-the-dead days. 'I'm stopping,' she said. 'I have no more.'

August told her not to worry and, in a no less agile manner than Celeste, flipped to his feet. He wanted to comfort her, but he knew he would have to do this with words only. They had stopped touching when they stopped playfighting, maybe two years ago, they had their thirteenth birthdays. 'You'll feel better about it next time,' said August. 'What you did was beautiful. I was entirely there. It felt –'

'You were?' Celeste asked.

'Entirely,' said August. 'I could feel the whole world all around me, in every direction.'

Celeste was silent for a short while, then said, 'I haven't felt that in months. It's not your fault. You've been marvellous – some of the best detailed describing ever. I don't know if I'll ever forget last month, standing on that exposed headland just after the April shower had passed – with the wonderful detail of the raindrops still clinging to the petals of the sea-pinks and other clifftop plants. It's not your fault,' she said, a second time. 'But I seem to have died.' Again, August knew better than to ask her to explain. 'My capacity is dying. It was so easy, once. All I needed was a new

word, and I was back. Now, I can be there, but it's like I'm just a dead person laid out in the grass – a dead person who's still alive. I can see, and my other senses work, but nothing really penetrates. Cold isn't cold like it should be. Even that frost you did, last week, which was very beautiful, it didn't chill me like it should have.'

Without saying anything further, they began to walk to the door. Although the tennis courts were almost completely dark, they knew their way unthinkingly. The one remaining fluorescent tube ticked on and off with a slowly slowing rhythm – sometimes minutes passed before it came back on, leading them to think it had died completely.

At least a decade had passed since anyone had used the courts for their original purpose – not since the last of the tennis balls had perished completely, so much that it hardly bounced any more; and then, with a final winning smash, had popped like a puffball in a cloud of rubbery dust. (This was preserved for the future in a test-tube.)

Since that last game, the courts – all eight of them, two by four – had remained almost entirely unvisited. Hardly surprising, because they were on a rarely needed deck.

It was only during one of the fourth-generation-childrens' epic games of chocolate-hunt that Celeste and August, together as always, had discovered the existence of the courts. Ever since, the courts were where they had gone when they wanted the illusion of privacy – although, at the start, so used were they to being watched, they didn't even have an idea of the

concept. The courts could still be seen through *it*, and anyone could have tracked them down. But because of the dark in there, they were unseen except for determined looking – in other words, if someone turned on the infra-red or heat-detection.

By general agreement, parents did not spy upon their children past the age of eleven. There was very little they could get up to that was dangerous; *it* was aware of where they were and what they were doing at all times. Lying in the dark and talking did not merit an alarm or an alert.

Outside the door to the courts, they separated – Celeste turning right, August going left; and from here, each of the cousins made their way to a different elevator, along deep corridors. There were no portholes this far inside the ship, and so no chance of seeing anything other than metal and illumination.

The lights on these decks, both overhead and at ankle level, came on as they approached and went off almost as soon as they had passed – a saving of energy and precious filaments. It had been another of their childhood games, to try to outpace the lights, but, of course, it couldn't be done; *it's* reactions and anticipations were faster than any child's. The most one could hope to achieve was to be slightly forward of the exact centre of the bubble or tube of light.

As they walked away from one another, they hardly noticed where they were; for Celeste and August, the UNSS *Armenia* had neither glamour nor grace. It was disgusting to them quite how well they knew it – all the accessible areas, at least. As adolescents, they now slunk down the same corridors they had

once crawled along or raced through shouting lo-lo-lo! When they came to a particular door, they knew exactly the direction in which it opened, the resistance it was likely to give. Occasionally, maintenance lubricated the stiff or tightened the loose, but most of the time their environs offered Celeste and August no surprises, only a time-depth of mechanical and severely limited, and limiting, knowledge. If they had been on earth, anywhere but in a prison, they would have sense-learnt paths and streets, beaches and fields, rockfaces and deserts. Instead, they knew corridor P-31 as the place where Celeste had pulled down Australia's pants so everyone saw his private parts. They knew that a mysterious smell of almonds or nuts of some sort came from under the cabin door of Mrs Woods, the last-surviving first-generationer.

The exterior was no better. Although none of the children, nor, in fact, the adults were aware of it, the vessel had been based by its designer upon the humped curve of *Arion ater agg*, commonly known as the large black slug. But despite the fact that their recognition of this could only possibly have been intuitive, both Celeste and August developed early on a sense of the vessel's essential sluggishness. It was not slow – at the time of its launch, the *Armenia* had been one of the ten fastest machines ever constructed. However, propulsion technology back on earth was developing exponentially, and a large unmanned transporter, intended to resupply them a couple of years after they arrived on the destined planet, and which itself had set off a full decade after they had, was now due to overtake them and arrive

there a full generation ahead: it seemed quite possible, if things continued as they were, that the original vessel would arrive on an partially colonized world. They would appear as, quite hilariously, a blast from the past; their equipment outmoded and unnecessary, their training and protocols redundant: more likely to be viewed as a drain on resources than a contribution to the new life. Still, they had to complete the journey; and, by most standards, one twentieth the speed of light was an incredible velocity. But space travel *wasn't* – *wasn't* travel; the reality of it being that there was no experience to have: the ship could quite as easily have been sitting in a purpose-built hangar in Florida, and the crew – as long as the window-simulations were good enough – would never have known the difference. Gravity was kept to 90 per cent of that on Earth, acclimatizing everybody to conditions on a planet they would never live to see. The vessel had made no discernible movement in over two decades. Among the youngest members of the crew, there was absolutely no sense of physical motion. This had consequences. One or two of the older children were reassured rather than upset by the total lack of events – and these tended to become hysterical whenever an older crew-member died. When the suicide occurred, the body had kept pace with the vessel for quite some time. Before they were pulled away, several children – among them Astra (later to become August's mother) but not Stella (later to give birth to Celeste) – had spotted it, and had waved happily and then frantically at the unresponsive woman. There was no such thing as an accident; why shouldn't Margaret take a walk

outside, without a suit? The children asked and were told. The facts came as quite a shock to them. This was not unusual (though, in this case, it was unusually extreme).

To each growing child, there came the inevitable moment of devastation, when they finally understood where they lived, and where – yet more dismayingly – they had and would have no choice *but* to live. Up until a certain age, all the soft-edged, covers-missing books they lettered from and all the tattered toys they inherited were suggestive of the animals and countries of Earth; some children, as a result, became obsessed with the naturalistic extremities of Africa, lions, elephants, rhinoceroses, antelopes; others with the tigers of China or the polar bears of the Arctic; or, like Celeste and August, the whales and dolphins and sharks of the seven seas. Around five years of age, however, their moment came, and they realized that they were doomed to live and die in a tigerless, rhino-bereft, dolphin-free place.

The cousins had been found, aged two and a half, staring out not through the main observation window, which faced forwards, but out of a small porthole that looked back in the direction from whence the vessel had come. How they had worked this out, no-one knew; what was certain was that they were crying, as if both their arms had been broken.

‘What’s wrong?’ Celeste’s mother had asked, when her daughter was carried squealing away from the starlit view and back to their quarters.

‘I want my home,’ said Celeste, very definitely. The ship, despite her never having lived anywhere else,

was never going to be her home; she sensed, she knew. 'I want everything.'

'What do you mean?' her mother asked. But all the explanation of *everything* that Celeste would give was 'Every-thing.'

August, to his mother, twin sister to Celeste's mother, was a little more forthcoming. 'We don't like Mission. We want some of the animals. We want a house with doors you can go in of and out of and in of again. We want a dog and a cat and a pig . . .'

Both mothers then tried, with some difficulty and, it has to be said, with deep feelings of ambivalence, if not hypocrisy, to persuade the children (and also themselves) that the *Armenia* was truly a wonderful place to live, despite the absence of almost everything their children's picture books had given them to expect.

'There are millions of children who will be sitting at home on Earth, one day, listening to what you are saying now, and thinking how silly you were being – thinking how much they'd really really like to swap places with you. And they've never seen an elephant or an I don't know a dolphin, either.' Not outside a zoo, she thought.

But even as she spoke, Astra felt again the sharp longing to which the disappointment of her own animal-disillusion had brought her.

The two sisters, Stella and Astra, met up later that evening, when their children were asleep, if not truly comforted, to speak and be critical.

'Why didn't Control anticipate this?' Stella said, meaning Mission Control.

‘It’s the hardest thing,’ Astra agreed, ‘when we’re all trying to keep thinking what we’re doing here is a great thing. That we’re lucky.’

‘Think how many children on earth wish they were here, travelling on a real space vessel.’

‘That’s what I said to him. That’s the official line.’

‘Did it work?’

‘No. I don’t think *Think how lucky you are* ever does with children. They just know they want something, and if they can’t have it the world’s unjust.’

‘We don’t have a world,’ said Astra. ‘That’s why it’s unjust.’

‘Control must have thought of this,’ said Stella. ‘We brought them up almost entirely on a diet of cuddly things. Why weren’t special books created, with galaxies and supernovas and all the wonderful things we’ve seen or are going to see?’ She spoke with much bitterness and some guilt; *wonderful* came out as the opposite: *shitty*. For how, aged five, Stella had yearned for a kitten – one just like the picture she had ripped from the book and kept beneath her pillow; a yellow-orange-gold-white-haired marmalade kitten with a big happy-making face. She still wanted one, that was something this whole episode made her realize. She still felt where it would fit, on her lap.

Their conversation did not pass unobserved, and sessions with the onboard psychologists were booked for both of them. and also for their children.

Astra’s feelings of resentment were fairly easily dealt with; perhaps because they were directed so straightforwardly at Mission, perhaps, also, because the animals she had herself fixated upon were already

unreachable: dinosaurs – baby-stegosauruses, in particular – had been her childish obsession, and because they were, in a sense, twice removed, it hadn't been difficult for her to give up hopes of them altogether.

'It's natural there should be a period of grief,' said the psychologist to Stella. 'In a way it really is like a true kind of personal loss that we all of us feel, each in our own particular way.' Attempted sincerity made her sentence collapsingly long. 'We all experience it, you know, in one way or another. But it passes, eventually. Together, we can help you work it through.'

Stella said *yes*, and tried to make herself believe she agreed, as well; the kitten, however, remained – the kitten and the ache of her cuddle-space.

And even thirty-two years later, on the point of gentle death, Stella found that this feeling had not gone away – had, in fact, continued to strengthen, until it became one of the reasons she was so easy about passing. To die, she hoped, was to be surrounded by soft, purring fur.

'Describe,' said Celeste, and this time August began with, 'Rain doesn't just fall – it's important to remember that. Sometimes it is known to go sideways; for example, in a particularly strong wind. And if, like now, we are on the top of a ridge on a really blowy day, the rain coming sideways might even seem to be going upwards, if it is leaping over the crest.' August was dissatisfied with himself and his describing – more than ever. He knew facts, and facts were all he knew. But when he spoke them, he couldn't stop them sounding like facts. When Celeste spoke, she

somehow made them seem like experiences – and, because of this, she was able to take him there. Perhaps, August thought, I am too worried about being correct. If I completely invented the weather, I wouldn't have to be afraid of getting it wrong.

He needed to start speaking again; Celeste's breathing told him she was impatient. 'There are accounts of the unpleasantness of some episodes of rain' – bad, he thought, bad-bad – 'where the breeze blowing it coldly into the face makes it feel like the person is being spat upon – that the weather personally hates them, and wants to do this most insulting thing. In almost all cultures, just as in ours, spitting in someone's face is a terrible thing to do.'

Celeste said, 'Spit in my face.'

August found himself unable to react.

'Spit in my face,' said Celeste.

'No.'

'Please. I want you to.'

'But why?'

'I want to know what it feels like, for the rain.'

'No, you don't. It's more –'

'I've had enough of words. We've agreed –'

'It's more than that. You think you'll enjoy it.'

This brought Celeste to a pause. She recovered quite quickly, however. 'Well, I won't be able to tell until you've done it, will I? Come on. I don't want to have to do it myself – that would just be stupid.'

There was more silence; the darkness flickered.

'You're wrong,' August said. 'I never want to look back at my life and know I spat at someone.' He did not say, *Particularly you.*

‘Even because they asked you to?’

August tried to find his arguments – he felt that he must have some. ‘That doesn’t make it any better. I’d still be the spitter. Years in the future, you could still say, *He once spat at me.*’

‘And you can show people me asking.’

August realized he had introduced an audience of unborn judges.

‘But that’s an explanation.’ His voice rang off the walls of the tennis courts. ‘The fact is, I did it – I was able to do it. People will only care about that. And the people who’ll watch on earth.’

They had propped themselves up on their elbows to have this discussion-not-argument. Now they lay back down and stared again towards where the ceiling was – each listening to the other’s breathing, for clues.

‘The rain gets heavier,’ Celeste said, assumingly. ‘It falls straight down, without deviating in any direction – although there is a slight breeze. We are sheltered a little, by the wall of stone you invented. Keep going.’

August was angry. For the first time, he wanted to describe badly, so as to frustrate Celeste.

‘Writers sometimes speak of this kind of rain as coming down in sheets. Often, when there is a little wind, a ripping effect is visible in thick-falling down-pours, and this must remind people of bedsheets, when they are hanging up. That is probably where it started. Curtains are also sometimes mentioned, although this must be for thicker rain. Curtains, as you know, are used to cover windows on the inside – to stop people from looking in and seeing what’s going on.’

‘Don’t patronize me.’

August continued. ‘They can be made of many sorts of material, curtains, so this comparison – rain like curtains – could mean many different things. Net-curtains were notoriously used in England for spying through – it was easy to see out of a house but hard to see in. I think it was just about possible, though. If you got close. And velvet curtains keep heat inside when Winter cold is trying to drag it out. Curtains suggest an obstruction to vision whereas sheets, even though you can’t really *see* through the fabric of cotton, suggest something more permeable to the eye.’

‘Stop it,’ said Celeste. August knew she meant the being annoying, not the describing. They were so familiar with one another’s nuances.

He changed, for her. The ridiculousness of the curtains, so unhelpful, had rid him of his anger.

‘We are lying in a strong, steady downpour of cold rain. The sky above us is without a hint of blue. It is many clouds that have become one single, solid, horizon-to-horizon cloud. This is white in colour but white that has been tainted with grey – made grubby by darkness. Each drop comes too fast for us to track it with our eyes; we can’t pick them out, one by one, against the background of the sky. They are transparent –’

‘That’s enough,’ Celeste said. ‘I’m leaving.’ But she did not move.

August waited. Celeste’s breathing was not completely in her control. It was passionate.

‘Of course they’re *transparent*,’ said Celeste, ‘they’re *water*.’

‘It is easier to see rain when looking sideways through it than when looking up into it.’

When Celeste didn’t respond, August stood up. ‘All I’m saying is, with the light-source behind them, and their only change a slight increase in size, and maybe a deviation from the vertical, that when you stare up into raindrops, you don’t really see them.’

The light flickered on. August could see exactly how Celeste lay, at his feet – angry relaxation.

‘Plus the fact,’ he added, ‘that it’s falling in your eyes, blinding you.’

And then, without thinking why he was doing it, he bent down and spat gently into her face.