

Methods of Dance

Ben Brooker

1.

You want to know what our universe looks like from Earth. You are curious. You have not been here before. You look up, and where we see stars, the smear of the Milky Way, you see further, all the way to the edges of the galaxy filaments that form the boundaries between voids. I think, were we to see such things, we would rupture, be undone. But you do a little dance, something like a tarantella, fast and light and teasing. This is what you came to see, I think. Not for you our paucity of vision, our black blanket of night, its pinpricks of distant fire. For you — supercluster complexes and galaxy walls, expanses of light and time and matter we've only known were there for the blink of an eye. You've always known. It's tempting to think you put these things there, but you did not. You must have your own names for them, names as lovely as ours but unsayable by our tongues. I reel ours off for I don't know whose benefit. The Great Attractor. The Pisces-Cetus Supercluster Complex. The Sculptor Void. The Zone of Avoidance, the patch of sky obscured by the Milky Way. I know you can see all the way through it, through to the Zone and beyond, wavelengths of light both visible and invisible. I don't know where your seeing stops. Ours ends with the dust and the stars, and what we scientists call attenuation — the gradual loss of light intensity through space. The cities obscure our vision even more, but I take you into the desert, still young (to you) ranges of red dirt and rock, where the air is clear. It makes no difference to you. The city lights do not trouble you, like a long-sighted person who can see to the back of the shop but not the newspaper in front of their eyes. The allusion is lost on you. I wonder if I am too. And yet here you are, dancing on our sand, unchanged by our gravity. I want to see the universe as you see it. I want to dance on your sand.

2.

You return, as all things return. Like the Earth, I am older, close to death, but you are the same. Perhaps you are ageless like the rocks, like the wind. Our probes and scans still cannot touch you. You walk through our planet like a shadow, through wars you can barely see and canyons you can hardly feel, and dancing, always dancing, a kinesis of light and heat, a way of speaking with the world without words. And yet your dance is not the same. That, alone,

has changed. Like a revenant, you press hard against the air and the earth, your back to history. You tremble like our pallbearers, your grief an ever-rippling shockwave, a waltz. A hole opens in the world at your approach, a vacuum unspun from the purest woe. Though you don't weep, you seem to cradle it, our world, this heavy, dying star stuff that holds you up, like a stillborn you can't let go of. For you there is no cause, no diagnosis. Our smokestacks and temperature rise, our coral sickening the colour of bone, your eyes — if that is what they are — unseeing; your skin — if that is what it is — unfeeling. Only death registers, at some abyssal depth; a grim insistent wave. You fear its loss, this particular vantage point, this singular way of seeing from one of the spiral arms of this exact clutch of stars and dust and gas. For all your power, you have not yet learned to live as the gods do, pensile and aloof. So you carry the Earth, or envelop it, in what I can only call love, our silent mutual knowing. And yet, like a god, your eyes glint with the murderous light of a red giant billions of years in my future, the one that will swell and swamp this corner of the universe, putting out its stars like the lamplighters of old. While you are away, roaming the mountains and the rivers, I wonder how you can live like this. You return to me at night after your wanderings. Your body reassembles in the desert folds, where its limbs, tired from the day, pool like blood. In the dark I wake full of fear. In my dream I could see all the way to the edge of the observable universe, the boundary between this expanse and the next, and you were not there.

3.

In the morning you whirl and shuffle, a dance new to me. You draw the desert sands around you like a cloak, scattering them again with a centrifugal shrug when you are done. My eyes, thick with time, see as in a dream now, colourless and flat, scanning with dim awareness the dunes you have raised up like gravestones. Between them we dance, a pas de deux, our limbs entwined like antlers, like frozen lightning. You lead, gentle as an oak, encircling me like planetesimals orbiting a new star. I blink, and the moment expands to fill an age, a space as wide as the sky. You swaddle me, my thin bones splintering with your love. The last thing I see is the morning sun streaking through you, the pale yolk of centuries. I wonder if you can see through me too, all the way to the hydrothermal vents where my ancestors first rollicked in the deep, long-ago (to me) dark. The day passes in a fury of heat. Later, clouds form above you, your mass swelling them and bringing rain, vertical blasts of air that hit the ground and scatter in every direction. All the while you carry me like a paper boat on a lake as the space behind my eyes grows darker, the rain more faint until I cannot feel it anymore. For a single, blazing instant I see as you do, as though shot out of both ends of a telescope at once. The

dull edges of the cosmic horizon appear to me, though there is no ‘me’ now, the spiral arms of distant galaxies welcoming, familial. All that once separated one thing from another is revealed as illusion, a shell game. Light falls and falls. Blackness unfolds. There you are. In the amniotic dark, we dance.

Ben Brooker is a writer, editor, and critic based on the unceded lands of the Peramangk people in the Adelaide Hills. His work has been featured by *Overland*, *Australian Book Review*, *RealTime*, *The Saturday Paper*, *Meanjin*, *Kill Your Darlings*, and others in Australia and overseas. Ben was an inaugural *Sydney Review of Books* Emerging Critics Fellow and was appointed to the board of Writers SA in May 2021. He is currently working on his first book, a cultural history of psychedelics in Australia.