

March 2018 Soleil reading  
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### WHEN A DOT GOES FOR A WALK...

He was a dreamer, a seer whose eye was like that of an exotic fish, velvety dark, never blinking, never showing judgment. His name was Paul, an artist who taught at a famous school in Berlin, a cerebral city that attracted people from all over the world.

Paul was beloved by his students because he called upon them to create pictures that hinted at mysteries. He taught that you start with a dot on paper or canvas. When this dot goes for a walk, it becomes a line, a line that can create space, tell stories.

Other teachers at that school were highly accomplished; some were architects and engineers who discovered systems based on modules, thus reducing the means of construction to their barest, Platonic, essence. A rib cage of steel was clad in curtains of glass so diaphanous, buildings seemed to rise without body. They were cold, however, cold as the walls of an iceberg.

By contrast, Paul was consumed by longings to find what might warm his heart. He wanted his images to touch emotions the way color and music do, neither needing words to reach the soul.

So one day Paul traveled southward, to the Mediterranean Sea—warm breezes, scents emanating from the porcelain blossoms of lemon trees, water reflecting the setting sun. Paul boarded a ship that would visit harbors along the coast.

One afternoon, he stood on the empty deck, and there, just beyond the ship's railing, rose a shimmering town, houses stacked, stone block on stone block, up to the summit, there forming a rampart like a crown on a majestic head. Narrow stairs and covered passages suggested the

way. Entranced, Paul let his eye wander, follow the paths to the top, where one might see everything. In the evening he committed this sight to his diary.

Shy by nature, but also preoccupied with his need to observe, Paul hid from fellow travelers, sometimes in dark corners. One evening, he noticed a couple at the railing, laughing, talking, pointing to the setting sun. Gently, the man lifted his hand, and with the tip of one finger traced the length of the woman's arm. She returned the intimate gesture with a warm smile. It was an exchange between two people who felt unobserved. They turned from the railing and walked away, hand in hand. Consumed by longing, Paul knew that fear would have kept him from ever touching this arm in this manner. Instead, he committed the experience to his diary, so as not to forget the lovers at the railing.

The trip continued to North Africa, the sea washing up against rocks and sand—brown, ochre, beige—dust reaching to the distant horizon. In this desert, the eye found relief in sparse palm trees bent under the wind, in distant ponds that glistened like beckoning eyes.

Paul went on land and entered a town—strange noises, and exotic smells; a market wound through narrow passages, men in white sat in doorways, drinking tea. A veiled woman stepped from an entrance, quickly, but Paul had caught her glance—large eyes, black as velvet, deep and mysterious. All else was hidden, encouraging the imagination to complete the image: What might her lips look like? Was her forehead high, leading to skeins of black hair falling like silk along an elegant neck and back?

In that second of passing, the woman's eyes lit up, her eyebrows arching slightly so as to suggest a smile; then she was gone. Paul longed for touch, like the one he had seen at the ship's railing, for the warmth of skin to the fingertips.

Once back at the cerebral city of the North, Paul created paintings, drawing on his

memories: The city that led to a crowning structure, the late afternoon sun on its walls. Suddenly he realized that lines might describe the scene's geometry. Arrows, however, would give motion, drive the eye further and further, show the paths taken, the dead-ends, the stairs and deep windows. Clearly, the arrow spoke of ever greater drive and longing. See more!

When he was finished, he gave his painting a title: *The Way to the Citadel*.

Then he remembered the longings of the Arabian evening, the glance from a veil in the market, the city at the desert's edge—all of that he brought together in a painting in brown, ochre and orange paint describing the dunes. Imposed upon this surface he placed a shape that might suggest a window, or perhaps the outline of a veiled head. Within it, two lake-eyes shine from the distance, palm fronds form eyebrows and, yes, there is a mouth—not luscious lips, but one simple, curved line. At its tip hangs a heart. Paul wanted the viewer to know that he was recounting sights, smells, sound and dream, all that he had seen and felt, all that had been forbidden.

He called the painting *Arab Song*.

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In Paul's absence, the country in the North had experienced a revolt. Marching armies, assemblies of thousands who cheered and saluted at fierce speeches, a sea of flags waving in the wind. The new leaders did not wish to hear about dreams, they intended to produce steel, bastions of stone, means of destruction, and they feared the mindful searches of the teachers and students at this school. Sameness was demanded. People who came from other places needed to be removed, and if they did not leave on their own volition, they would be made to do so.

Soon the engineers, architects and designers found work in other countries, but Paul, who had lived here since student days, whose paintings hung in famous museums—where was he to go? However, the school was soon closed, the students forced to march.

The powers in control were at a loss to justify Paul's expulsion. How do you treat an artist who has done nothing but put lines and arrows on canvas? What accusations can you make against a dreamer? So the powers spread a rumor that Paul's mother was not all, but half, of a people they hated and wanted expunged. This, they believed, would justify efforts to arrest Paul. And, indeed, one day, when he saw the police arrive below his apartment window, Paul walked to the roof, jumped to the next building and found a way to flee to Switzerland, the country of his birth.

During the last years of his life, Paul created many small watercolors and collages, but, one day, when he found a photo of a huge painting by Picasso, *Guernica*, a scream of protest against the savagery of the Spanish civil war, he began to work on one large painting.

Taking from Picasso the image of the confrontation between woman and steer, a scene so prevalent in this artist's prints, he placed both into the top corner, just as Picasso often did. The torso of the woman in Paul's painting is a New Guinean shield, her face is beautiful; one of her eyes floats freely in space toward the steer's head that is severed from its body.

Woven throughout this painting's surface is a tight jumble of exotic, foreign patterns you might see in cities of the Near East, or skeletons of creatures found in museums of natural history. Placed directly behind the woman's head, is a Star of David and another one appears behind her back, as though to signify her as "other" and now endangered. And there are many eyes, eye shields, eye glasses staring at you, watching. Strewn about, are pieces of school furniture, balls, running stick figures, fish skeletons, a jumble that ignores all Western traditions

of scale and proportion, celebrating that which the new culture of the dictators derided as “The Primitive” or the work of “The Insane.”

Below the center of this cacophony, framed by curving lines, is a circle—is it the Earth? Its color is deep red and it floats in shades of reddish-white. And there, just above the globe, flowing from the steer’s severed neck, is one single, large red drop falling onto one side of the globe—is it blood?

Paul named this painting *Picture Album*, a reference to children’s books wherein the world is explained in all its detail. In fact, this is a memory picture. Searches of museums in Germany and publications owned by Paul show details of almost all fragments in this painting. Isolated and ill in Switzerland, he was describing what once had meaning in his life, recalling it as a quiet accusation. It is Paul’s very own *Guernica*, but unlike Picasso’s scream, it is a lament by an artist who preferred to remain hidden.

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You may have guessed by now that the artist’s name was Paul Klee. He died shortly after having seen his paintings removed from museums and galleries in the country he had loved. They were displayed in a hateful exhibition entitled “Degenerate Art.” Then his works were sold to international galleries to add money to the war coffers.

And that is how *Picture Album*, together with *The Way to the Citadel* and *Arab Song* came to a small museum in Washington, D.C., where, to this day, they hang in a room full of the artist’s work. Young people, and especially artist who are dreamers, come to visit. There they ponder the fate of those who are different, or those who hold a mirror to power.