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# AN OCCURRENCE AT AVIGNON

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Imagine being a river. You flow from a source and empty into a lake, a sea, an ocean. At times you converge with other rivers. Perhaps you will make tributaries, which might branch into streams or creeks, a whole series of fluvial offspring. You muscle through fields, divide cities, declare boundaries.

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If you're a long river, you meander far and wide. You may be cosmopolitan or rural, dangerous or calm, rapid or smooth, clean or dirty. Maybe you will be some of these things in some places and none or all in others. Regardless of what type of river you are, or whether you run north to south or east to west, you know this one true thing: no one ignores a river. Not the fish who school in your shallows and depths, not the turtles burrowing in your banks or the otters frolicking in your waters, not the birds nesting along your shores. You are sustained by the lives and deaths of these creatures, and they, in turn, derive sustenance from you.

With humans, you cultivate a different relationship, one in which what they take from you is disproportionately unequal to what they give back. For them you represent a challenge to tame, a thing to ride or use as transport. People render you politically necessary: they want to conquer you, divert your flow to create or protect their communities, harness your energy to illuminate and otherwise power their multitudinous dwellings, use you as a receptacle for their wastes or to irrigate their crops. They want to drink you, bathe in you, claim your divinity as their own, bestow names upon you. They will fight over you. Create laws and regulations because of you. They will even imitate the beavers, whose fur they covet, to harness your power. And, of course, they will ford, ferry, or span you, just to reach your opposite flank.

This story concerns one such enterprise in crossing.

**Languedoc, France. Early spring, 1177.  
Gibbous moon.**

On a tendril somewhere a bud harbors the idea of fruit. Hawks fly. Mice scurry under the smooth dark. Predator and prey scan ground and

air in the endless dance of seek and hide. Behind their drama, a chorus of frogs strikes an erratic heartbeat. The rollick of a swollen tributary pulses, on its way to nourish the mighty Rhône, the river that separates the Comté de Toulouse in the Kingdom of France from the Comtat Venaissin, an enclave of the Holy Roman Empire. Moonlight, filtered by the naked tree branches, patterns the forest floor with jagged shapes. A wild boar stops here and there to root out acorns. He detects the scent of pursuit and coupling, and though he has sired many young, the odor still invigorates him. The woods, damp with must, are rife with mushrooms, which the boar also smells.

A turtle stirs in the silt of the riverbank, opens her shiny black eyes for the first time since the trees shed their leaves. She begins to nose her way up, beyond the mud that covers her, toward the sky. Her shell—masquerading as a clump of dirt or a rock—is muted brown, algaenous green, patterned with what seem like the imprints of ferns. Discreet.

Not far from the river's edge, a cluster of stone dwellings, mere outlines of structures in the flattening dusk, now separates from the lightning sky. Sheep bleat. Hooves thud on hay and earth. A rooster puffs out his cream-colored breast.

Candle-shadowed figures quiver on the stone wall of a low, small room. A boy—his name is Benoît, but he will come to be called Bénézet—sits on a plain wooden bench worn smooth by generations before him. Though he is interested in the ways of his ancestors and listens intently to stories about them, on this morning he does not consider their lives, their break fasting at this table or their supping in a litany of prayer and silence and storytelling. He simply watches as his mother sets a bowl before him, inclining his head and inhaling the familiar odor of bread

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crusts soaked in warm wine. He closes his eyes. His mother watches the pulse of fine blue veins that web his lids. Her gaze falls to his hands, loosely joined in prayer, resting on the dark surface of the table. He is the Blessed One. She bestowed upon him this name; the Holy Virgin commanded her thusly as she labored to bring him out of her darkness and into the light.

Mother and son eat without speaking, their breath issuing as mist. In the near distance, the sheep snort and wait, as they snort and wait each morning. The boy finishes the food, rises from the bench. His mother considers that today is the start of his thirteenth year. This small detail, like the hole in her apron, is perceptible only to her. She knows he will leave this house soon, for she woke awash in a dream of his departure.

Benoît unlatches the heavy stable door.

“*Allez,*” he commands the sheep, who press through the opening.

Daybreak alights on the hamlet tucked into the Vivarais Mountains. This is the shepherd-boy’s life: the cypress-stabbed sky in the pale blood of dawn; the woolen press of sheep following the anesthetic silence of breakfast. The rituals: pasture, till, sow, reap, hay, shear, and slaughter; fire and weave and feast. The passersby: troubadours, mystics, pilgrims, and crusaders.

Benoît has walked the abundant pastures and errant foothills with his mother, his father dead for some years, his sisters married and living in other houses, his older brothers killed and their bodies lost in the wars against the infidels. And with the sheep. Mostly with the sheep.

The Rhône is 505 miles long. Not the longest river in Europe, it is, according to its biographer Charles Lenthéric “incontestably the one most intimately linked to the lives of civilized people.” As he explains in *Le Rhône* (1905), because the river empties into the Mediterranean Sea, Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans used this waterway as the “great road” into France, bringing with them their various cultures, art, and religions, and their conquerors and money.

The river originates in the glacial meltwaters that issue from an ice cavern in Switzerland, flowing through the Alps into the eastern end of Lake Geneva, out the western end, and into a twisting course through the Jura Mountains of eastern France. At Lyon, the river turns

south. Of the Rhône’s many tributaries, the largest are the Arve, Ain, Saône, Isère, Drôme, Ardèche, Durance, and Gard. As it reaches the sea, the river divides into two arms, which embrace the grassland-cum-lagoon delta of the Camargue, with the larger channel, the Grand Rhône, to the east, and the smaller Petit Rhône to the west.

Avignon, where the drama of this river-crossing story unfolds, derives its name from *Avenio*, which means “sovereign of the waters.”

### Languedoc, France. Spring, 1177. New moon.

All that has emerged from the earth sweats with desire, yearns for the pregnant ecstasy that precedes the push of fruit. Each creature in the river-suckled grasses and woods carries on the cycle, instructing a new generation in the cartography of mobility and survival. Owl and owlet. Duck and duckling. Bear and cub. Deer and fawn.

Benoît awakes just before the singing of the birds. The umber hush that drapes the room is punctuated only by his mother’s breathing.

rock, as familiar to him as the smell of hay. From this place, he can make out the flash of the Bourges, running heavy with meltwaters. As he watches the sheep move along with the slow determination of their kind, the shepherd loosens his robe, stretches his legs, and closes his eyes. He feels himself moving, and when he opens his eyes to dispel this illusion, he finds he has been transported to a place he has never seen, but which he recognizes from the stories of travelers as the Pont d’Arc, a natural stone bridge in the Ardèche River Gorge, in whose steep terraces loom hollowed-out entrances to prehistoric dwellings. The sheep are nowhere in sight. The sun, now at its midday position, begins to dim. The riverbanks and canyon walls blush lavender, then blue-violet, and the water roils indigo. As daylight subsides, the trees, grass, and sky darken into different shades of purple. A great turbulence churns the river. The last crescent of sun shines on a rock in the middle of this watery violence. And then that light, too, is extinguished.

On the opposite shore, a white flame spurts up from the dank ultramarine, the only part of

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HE IS THE BLESSED ONE. SHE BESTOWED UPON HIM THIS NAME;  
THE HOLY VIRGIN COMMANDED HER THUSLY AS SHE LABORED TO  
BRING HIM OUT OF HER DARKNESS AND INTO THE LIGHT.

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He arises, pulls on his coarse linen hose, and slips into shoes. As his eyes adjust to the darkness, the boy discerns the curve of his mother’s shoulder. In that roundness, which rises out of the obscured angles of morning’s ambiguity, he finds something so gentle and unknown it is tragic. He cannot name this thing he sees, and though he has no intention of traveling anywhere far on this day, he senses what he sees in the round of her arm as a prelude to a leave-taking heavy with forever.

Light rain taps on the thatch of the roof. Benoît dons his hooded *sayon* and makes his way to the barn. One lamb wakes, the male with the all-black ears, the one born on the last full moon. The animal raises his head, and Benoît sees in its milk-soft eyes the congress of awe and sorrow. He runs his fingers along the smooth wood of his shepherd’s staff and wonders if this lamb will live.

The sun has risen when the boy reaches the mountain pasture. He sits on a round, smooth

this landscape not drenched in the violet-toned dusk, a preternatural darkness that will be recorded by chroniclers as an eclipse, though no eclipse—full or partial—ever occurred in southern France in 1177. In the fire appears a translucent figure—neither male nor female—who skates across the surface of the water with the grace and speed of a dragonfly. This creature beckons the boy to approach, and as Benoît steps into the water, he is surprised at how calm and warm it is.

“Little Blessed One,” it hums, “Divine messenger are we. A bridge you must build, say we, at Avignon, yes, oh yes, in the *Rodo*, the rolling river, the one you call the Rhône. Divine messenger are we, of the most holy Virgin Mother, blessed Marie. She who told us of the Little Blessed One who would come to knit these lands together with stone.”

As Benoît reaches to touch the creature, a gust of wind disturbs the surface of the water, and the vision dissolves. The shepherd stands

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at the edge of a glacial lake on a mountain he does not know.

“For the love of heaven,” he whispers to the placid surface of the water, “where am I?”

In the stillness, the boy understands, though he is unsure how, that he stands at the source of the Rhône. He does not feel afraid, not even for the sheep, who were certainly frightened by the darkening light but who must now be grazing untended. He wonders if his mother saw the sun extinguished at the same time he saw it, if the day remains dark as night, and whether she is able, with what she calls her great gift of godsight, to perceive him here where the mighty river begins.

Though no clouds block the sun, shadows dim the surface of the water. In its center a whirlpool begins to form and spin. Again the translucent figure arises.

“Come he has, come he has, the Little Blessed One,” it sings. “Come he has to us who will guide him on a journey, on a journey, on a quest, a quest to the *Rodo*, the great rolling waters. Look in the source say we, we the divine messenger, and you shall, Little Blessed One, be on your way, on your way.”

The shepherd fixes his eyes on the water. He will not witness the transport, nor will he feel the distance traveled; he will merely wake from a light sleep not far from a group of small houses, in an unfamiliar village. Beyond the commune’s stone periphery gleams the Rhône. Like so many moments in history, this introduction of a boy to something larger than he has ever encountered is an inconspicuous meeting.

**O**f the Pont Saint Bénézet’s twenty-two original stone arches, only four remain. A series of floods eroded the bridge little by little; by 1680, the structure was in such disrepair that both the Consul of Avignon and the King of France refused to finance its maintenance or repair. The arches crumbled. Ferries transported passengers back and forth until 1819, when a wooden bridge was constructed, but it blocked navigation and was not solid. The engineer Bouvier designed a stone suspension bridge, which was completed in 1887 and stood until 1960, when it was demolished and replaced with the Pont Edouard Daladier, an arch bridge, which links the city of Avignon with the citadel hamlet on its opposite bank,

Villeneuve-les-Avignon. This bridge is neither a feat of engineering nor an achievement of design, nor was it inspired by any miracle of God. Instead, it is a utilitarian fact of postwar, space-age technology. With its once modern lines that are now cliché, it does the job of providing passage across the Rhône.

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THE RITUALS: PASTURE, TILL, SOW, REAP, HAY, SHEAR, AND SLAUGHTER;  
FIRE AND WEAVE AND FEAST. THE PASSERSBY: TROUBADOURS, MYSTICS,  
PILGRIMS, AND CRUSADERS.

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“A great bridge,” writes Gay Talese, “is a poetic construction of enduring beauty and utility.” In the twelfth century, the building of bridges constituted an act of pious charity. The word *pontiff* signals the importance to the church of such endeavors; indeed, the Bridge-Building Brotherhood was called the *Fratres Pontifices*, or *Frères Pontifes*. Saint Bénézet is commonly credited with founding the brotherhood, which was responsible for erecting bridges throughout the region. After Benoît proved his vision to be worthy (miracles were involved), he is said to have raised alms to build the bridge. The beauty of his undertaking, though its manifestation is now broken, has endured. The fact of the bridge and its unlikely construction testifies to a human impulse to make things that transcend utility.

**A**mbiguity infuses Saint Bénézet’s biography. Several authors—among them the prominent French engineer Saint-Venant—maintain that the boy came from the Vivarais, on the western, Languedoc side of the Rhône. Butler, in *Lives of the Saints*, writes that young Benoît was born and raised in the eastern region of the Savoie, or the Ardennes. The village of Hermillon, east of Grenoble, claims the shepherd as their own; a bridge called the Pont Saint Bénézet stands there, spanning the Arc River. If it *is* true that Benoît came from the Avignon side of the Rhône, was he simply a young man heading west? Does such a drive foreshadow the great westward push that Europeans would make, first to cross the Atlantic, then to cross the continent they called America, several centuries later? Or is that just me, the narrator, speculating, with hindsight as my guide?

Because I admire Saint-Venant’s curious lifetime preoccupation with the boy and am

partial to his version of the saint’s biography, I choose to believe that Little Benoît came from Burzet, a village situated in the mountains, on a small affluent of the Ardèche, which feeds into the Rhône on its western flank. I like to imagine that the shepherd boy followed this particular branch of the riparian family, beginning with

the stream that provided water to his village and working toward the source of the Rhône in the Swiss Alps. This journey east might have been compelled by inexplicable magnetic forces, anathema to empirical thinking, often labeled *visions* in retrospect (and emphasized by the inclusion of an eclipse, a common narrative device amongst medieval chroniclers). What else explains an ordinary shepherd boy assuming a task so large he never lived to see it finished? What if he was simply curious about the origin of a river, a body of water and its offshoots that defined his life, and the lives of so many of his contemporaries, in so many different ways? And though no historian suggests that Bénézet was after something other than the building of a bridge, perhaps Hermillon was simply a stop along his way to the Rhône Glacier.

To understand a story fragmented by time, an incomplete historical record, and the obscured memories of others, you must live with it and absorb its pieces for a long time. Which is what I’ve done with the legend of Little Benoît. I know of only one other so entranced by this same narrative, the master bridge builder of the nineteenth century, A. B. de Saint-Venant, whose biography of the patron saint of engineers was published posthumously by his children (there’s a story in that, too, of course).

**Commune of Avignon. Spring, 1177.  
Crescent moon.**

Here is Benoît, waiting to see the bishop at Avignon. Sitting in a grand room, he looks at objects for which he has no words: ornate tapestries depicting the alabaster-complexioned Queen’s ladies-in-waiting or hunting scenes featuring princes and earls astride noble mounts; silver candelabras and bejeweled sconces; portraits of clergy in elaborate, gilded frames.

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The chair is soft, the stone floor smooth. Glass covers the windows, and the ceiling stretches toward heaven, causing the boy to yearn for his close-to-the-earth home. Benoît knows he does not belong in this room with these things he cannot name. He also understands that, despite his lack of worldliness, he feels a certainty about building the bridge more sacred than any of the miraculous possessions on display here.

*This shepherd, thinks Father Clément, is possessed and needs a cure.* Perhaps the bishop will recommend him to the Benedictines at the Mount Andaon. If a bridge were meant to be here at Avignon, Our Lady of Pity, Our Lady of the Silent Tears, Our Lady of the Waters would have told one of *us*. This boy, this shepherd from the other side of the river, is illiterate and unconscious of Christ. He is a child. Perhaps he

## Commune of Avignon. Spring. Crescent moon.

*Naturally, thinks the bishop, as he dabs at his lips, greased with the roast duck Father Clément now eyes greedily, naturally this shepherd—this interloper!—who claims revelatory powers, is named Benoît.* He must have the notion that because his mother called him the Blessed One, he really is called. *So common among the commoners, he thinks, to wish to rise above one's station.*

"Very well, then, Father Clément, I shall speak with this silly boy. But I pray thee accompany me lest any miracles require witness." The bishop knows the priest will not dare display his displeasure at missing the noonday meal. Besides, Clément has grown too fat, too soft around the middle. He could do with a bit of penury.

When Benoît sees the bishop, with his thick velvet robes and his hands decorated with jewel-studded rings, the boy knows he is meant to feel small and unclean. And when this man looks at him, the shepherd feels something else emanating from the man, some mixture of loathing and desire that is both terrible and disgraceful and threatens to end his quest before it has truly started. *And yet, I must not doubt my mission here, Benoît thinks.*

"On your knees before his holiness," commands Father Clément. The bishop extends a large, soft, unblemished hand that has never labored, and Benoît kneels to kiss it. As his lips touch the man's skin, he tastes the residue of rich duck fat and thinks how strange it is that he has not eaten since the new moon and yet he feels no hunger. For an instant he sees the tableau of the last meal with his mother and he almost smells the fire, the warm wine, her sweat. He wishes she were here, though he knows he will never see her again.

"Well, boy," says the bishop, "I understand thou didst hear a voice. And thou holdest to your presumption, that this voice belongs to an angel?"

"Your holiness, what do *you* suppose possesses such a voice?" "Thou dare be insolent with me, child?" the bishop says, though he is more alarmed by the boy's loveliness—the strangely colored eyes that suggest he is melting on the inside, the long lashes, the long, feminine curls that can frenzy a cloistered

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IN THE FIRE APPEARS A TRANSLUCENT FIGURE—NEITHER MALE NOR FEMALE—WHO SKATES ACROSS THE SURFACE OF THE WATER WITH THE GRACE AND SPEED OF A DRAGONFLY. THIS CREATURE BECKONS THE BOY TO APPROACH, AND AS BENOÎT STEPS INTO THE WATER, HE IS SURPRISED AT HOW CALM AND WARM IT IS.

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A priest enters the room. Let us call him Father Clément, to underscore his distaste for clemency and goodwill. Who is this boy, he wonders, with his ambergris eyes and those black curls buoyant as crows? Who is this boy, who claims to have come to Avignon on a divine errand? Who is this boy to interrupt the holy work of God's ordained servants?

"Thou didst dream, then?" asks the priest, who is eager to dispense with this interview and join his brethren at the midday meal.

"No, father, it was not a dream. It was... it was not like dreaming and it was not like waking either..."

*He speaks in riddles, thinks Father Clément. May he not tarry.* The priest coughs.

"The sun...the sun went dark. I heard a voice in a light that rose from the water. Everything became purple. The voice in the light commanded me here to—"

"Didst thou take the color of the holy shroud apparent in thy reveries, the color of the holiest of shrouds of our Lady of Pity, to be a sign?"

"Plainly, father, I am but a simple shepherd. I know nothing of shrouds or what one may read in colors. The voice in the light told me it was a messenger for the Blessed Virgin Mother. The light itself was white."

Benoît knows better than to describe the translucent figure who spoke the message. He can tell that the priest does not believe his story and feels annoyed to even listen to its telling. Though he refuses to doubt his mission here, Benoît wonders how he will convince anyone of what he feels more and more obliged, with each passing hour, to undertake.

is a Cathar and should be punished for heresy.

"Please, father," Benoît says. "Permit me audience with the bishop. For I am but a messenger of the divine Virgin, and my message is urgent."

The priest glares at the boy, whose impertinent insistence has cut short his meal and threatens to sour the mood of the bishop. All this talk of messages and urgency.

Before the Pont Saint Bénézet was built, not a single bridge spanned the Rhône south of Vienne. Travelers were at the mercy of ferry-men, some of whom were honorable, but most of whom earned what author Noël Marmottan calls "a sad reputation" for their avarice and criminal impulses. In several versions of the Saint Bénézet legend, adapted from medieval chronicles, the boy haggles with a Jewish ferryman, who extorts all the shepherd's meager funds and dismisses his pleas in the name of the Virgin Mary as insufferable. That this Jew is greedy and unkind, that he has the potential to block a divine communication from being delivered, accurately reflects the anti-Semitic mood of a France whose king would expel the Jews several hundred years after Benoît crossed the river, performed miracles, and was canonized as the patron saint of engineers and bridge builders. But the inclusion of this mean-spirited ferryman is also troublesome, particularly because a Jewish community thrived in Provence at the time and also because Avignon was one of the few places that offered safe haven to Jews after their expulsion from France.

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man—and for a moment, he is afraid that this poor, unscriptured child will damage him.

“Art thou a *bon homme*, little shepherd? Dost thou renounce the crucifixion of Christ, our Savior?”

“No, your holiness. I am but a poor shepherd who was tending his mother’s sheep. I swear on my mother’s life that I heard the call, issued by an angel, to build a bridge here across the mighty river.”

The bishop fixes Benoît with his watery, sagging, consumed eyes, which are inadequate to the task of imagining anything beyond the thick stone walls of his comfortable, protected world.

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CLÉMENT HAS GROWN TOO FAT, TOO SOFT AROUND THE MIDDLE.  
HE COULD DO WITH A BIT OF PENURY.

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“No,” he says, sputtering and spewing a bit of duck flesh caught between his teeth, “there will be no bridge built here at Avignon. We shall take him, Father Clément, to see the consul.”

“But your holiness,” says Father Clément, perhaps because hunger has softened him toward the boy, “the consul is a cruel man. He will flay the boy alive, cut off his hands and feet.”

In the late twelfth century, heresy posed a serious threat to the Catholic Church. The sect of the *bons hommes* and *bonnes femmes* (who came to be called Cathars or Albigensians)—who believed that love and power were incompatible and sought to divest themselves of material wealth and the physical realm to attain spiritual purity—flourished in Languedoc, that territory to the west of the Rhône. The church, with its empire-based power and opulent wealth, was highly motivated to purge from its folds such heretics. Benoît died in 1184, the same year Pope Lucius III formulated the charter that officially commenced the age of the Inquisition, laying the groundwork for the Albigensian Crusade of 1208, formally launched by Pope Innocent III to rid France of the *bons hommes* and *bonnes femmes*.

The war lasted for twenty years and resulted in the killing and mutilation of thousands of confirmed or suspected heretics and their allies. A papal decree permitting the confiscation of land belonging to the Cathars induced many

French nobles in the north to join in the crusade and thus acquire new fiefs.

Commune of Avignon. Spring, 1177.  
Crescent moon.

The bishop and Father Clément bring Benoît before the Consul of Avignon, who is curious to behold this shepherd, of whom he has already received reports. He is the consul, after all, and his agents, planted in the church and the bishop’s office, and throughout the houses of the nobles, are well remunerated for their work. How else can he expect to keep the peace, to exercise control over the many factions vying for power in his city? He has

been told, too, of the boy’s beauty, but it does not stir in him the same sort of yearning that rouses the bishop, who wishes now for the consul to humiliate publicly this Little Blessed One. Desire and thoughts of punishment twine together in the bishop’s groin and gut. *God’s love*, he thinks, *means having power to bend to your will that which you cannot possess in ordinary ways.*

The consul clears his throat and addresses Benoît, though he does not look at the boy, gazing instead over his head, toward the river.

“Dost thou, a miserable little being and destitute, say thou canst build a bridge where neither God, nor Peter, nor Paul, nor even Charles, nor anyone else, could build it, and no wonder?”

“Yes, my lord, I can and I will,” says the boy.

The consul looks down upon Benoît,

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DESIRE AND THOUGHTS OF PUNISHMENT TWINE TOGETHER IN THE  
BISHOP’S GROIN AND GUT.

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and the bishop, delighted by the possibility that this beautiful boy will be made to recant such nonsense or face dismemberment and pain, feels his heart quicken. He is surprised when the consul speaks again, in a tone that is all business.

“Since I know that a bridge is built of stones and mortar, I will give thee one stone that I have in my palace, and if thou canst lift it and

carry it away, I will believe that thou art to build the bridge.”

The bishop sags. Father Clément’s stomach growls.

“Let us go then and see this marvel,” says the bishop.

A crowd gathers at the palace. “Behold the stone that thirty laborers cannot stir,” declares the consul. The spectators murmur.

Benoît prays—to God, to the Virgin, to Jesus. He thinks of his mother, the sheep, his brothers and sisters, all he has abandoned to stand here in this place at this moment. Though he is lithe and lean, with legs knotted into hard muscles from his mountain shepherding, he is a boy still, and small at that. He approaches the stone. A breeze ruffles his hair. Without any fuss, he lifts the rock, and, according to a thirteenth-century chronicler, carries it “as easily as if it had been a pebble,” setting it down where the first pier of the bridge would be set.

The word *miracle* appeared in writing for the first time in the twelfth century. It derives from the Latin verb *mirari*, “to wonder,” and the adjective *mirus*, meaning “astonishing, strange, wonderful.” In the Bible, three Greek words—*semeion* (sign), *teras* (wonder), and *dynamis* (power)—describe what we would now name a miracle. According to Paul Flanagan and Robert Schihl: “a miracle is an unusual event (‘wonder’) that conveys and confirms an unusual (‘divine’) message (‘sign’) by means of unusual power (‘power’).”

This occurrence at Avignon leaves me wondering how to distinguish between miracle and inspiration. One might say Benoît was simply a boy with a dream—to journey east, to cross a river, to leave his mark upon the land so that

others might make a safer passage. That he was *called*—by a force of nature, or God, or a voice, or creatures we describe as angels, invisible to most. That some message was meant by the bridge’s twenty-two original arches, which were not destined to remain, but whose numerical imprint evokes a time when the edifices that masons and carpenters built were infused with sacred numbers (or, some might argue,

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when numbers took on significance because of superstition or ignorance). But aren't such dreams as much a part of the artist's life—or

But what if you cannot observe everything that occurs in nature? It would take seven centuries after Aquinas for Schrödinger to devise his

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THEY ARE ORDINARY PEOPLE—SHOPKEEPERS, BEGGARS, FARMERS,  
TEACHERS—SO ORDINARY THEY DO NOT EVEN KNOW THEY ARE SAINTS.

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the writer's? Why is the word *divine* not used to describe the inspiration that catalyzed the work of Lucian Freud or Zora Neal Hurston or Camille Claudel or Twyla Tharp? Forget art and literature: Consider the electrician whose patience, skill, and apprenticeship means you can flip a switch and illuminate a room. Or the shoe-repair man in one of those narrow stores that smells of polish and leather, hunched over the bench, who can rejuvenate your favorite pair of boots. Or the nurse whose hand on your shoulder says she has all the time in the world to care for you. Why such distinctions? Why do we not call these quotidian acts of grace—whether brought forth by artistic intervention, technology, skill, or kindness—miracles or acts of divinity?

The Jewish mystics—whose traditions once flourished in Provence and whose relatives were protected in Avignon—believe that thirty-six saints, the Lamed Vov, keep the world intact. They are ordinary people—shopkeepers, beggars, farmers, teachers—so ordinary they do not even know they are saints. If they were to realize what they were, or become greedy or unkind, the mystics say, the fabric of the world would unravel. Without them, the miracle of life would cease.

Science has played a large part in trying to disprove the miracle. Littlewood's Law proposes that miracles—extraordinary events of special significance—happen so frequently that they are ordinary occurrences—in other words, not miraculous at all. Yet what are we to make of the testimonies to Benoît's saint-making accomplishments? Among other astonishing feats (in addition to lifting the stone), he is said to have cured a hunchbacked woman, and his corpse, which was buried under the bridge and moved in the seventeenth century, was discovered to be incorrupt when the coffin was opened.

In terms of miracles, St. Thomas Aquinas reflected: "Those effects are rightly to be termed miracles which are wrought by Divine power apart from the order usually observed in nature."

renowned thought experiment, making famous a hypothetical cat who might be—miraculously—both dead and alive at the same time. And what, I wonder, would St. Thomas have made of the physicist David Bohm (who dared to seek an equation expressing the wonder of the universe itself), who asserted: "the observed is profoundly affected by the observer, and the observer by the observed—they really are one cycle, one process"? At a certain point, Bohm notes: "the observer is the observed."

Bénézet might have understood this paradox in a different way—he was the observer of a vision and the observed of the miracle provoked by the vision. Or perhaps he simply defied the expectations of a handful of men who were too busy wanting some other ending for the story they found themselves involved in denying. Maybe, some might argue, that's all a miracle is: an unexpected answer to a problem that skeptics cannot or do not want to solve.

After the young shepherd lifted that stone, the narrative of his vision was fulfilled, though he did not live to see the bridge completed—he died in 1184; the bridge was finished in 1187. The members of the bridge-building brotherhood, reputedly formed by Benoît, would erect bridges all over southern France, making possible crossings that in turn led to greater mobility and interchange. The bridge at Avignon was the first to link the southern regions of Languedoc and Provence, and besides being memorialized in song, became an integral route for pilgrims journeying between Italy and Spain.

**Languedoc, France. Late autumn,  
1184. Full moon.**

A leaf detaches from a branch and falls, its descent interrupted by a breeze that lifts and twirls it. Wind stirs the few leaves remaining in the trees. An owl hoots. Mice and squirrels take refuge in their nests, noses snug to tails, the long cold ahead just a whisper on this night. A pregnant bear sleeps in a cave. The turtles have dug into the riverbank.

Not far from the water's edge, the inhabitants of the hamlet Burzet gather in front of a bonfire. Their bellies are full of roast mutton and wine and millet; the Feast of Saint Martin is ending. A wolf howls and the villagers look toward the forest.

One woman has left the gathering. She too hears the wolf's cry and knows it is only a matter of time before such powerful creatures no longer lope beyond the dwellings of her village. She sits on a plain wooden bench worn smooth by generations before her, though tonight the stories of ancestors do not capture her imagination. She thinks instead of her son, of his long fingers laced together in prayer, his thick curls that smelled—when he was a baby and she could still hold him—like rain in grass, and the fine blue veins that webbed his eyelids. The Blessed One, she had named him. Now, like the rest of her sons, he is gone.

The sheep breathe and rustle in the barn; there are fewer of them since Benoît's disappearance, and while it is work for an old woman to shepherd and husband the animals alone, she perseveres. Their wooliness comforts her. Her boy, she knows, from the pilgrims and crusaders who pass through the hamlet, has done great things. He has performed feats requiring the intervention of God, they say, though she is certain he has simply listened to the voices she always felt he would hear.

Imagine being this river, the one followed, in ancient times, by explorers into a land they named Gaul and then France. You are rolling water, nourished by glacial melt, alpine streams, and diverse tributaries. You freeze and thaw, run high and low, carve valleys and feed lakes. You are called "perilous" and "turbulent" in some places and, at various times, "uncrossable." In one of those spots, an impetuous human boy—*impetuous*, yes, that must be the word to describe a youth who insists on ignoring your wildness because a divine voice so instructed him—envisions and inspires a span to be built. For hundreds of years you rage until the stone arches of that span are sundered, and though you seethe for several centuries more, you are unable to drown what remains of the structure, and now the memory of the boy (you did once afford him passage) is part of the thing he made to cross you, and no matter how powerful you are, you cannot wash him away. ❧