

The Inbetween Space

Short stories by Lain Rose Kent

From the Basin to a Drum

The fountain water was impossibly blue, a blue as bright as the grass that stretched out in every direction was green. The fountain was simple, a wide, perfectly cylindrical basin with a straight pillar standing in the center holding two tiers of plates above it, all constructed out of a single shade of cloudy concrete. The basin was endlessly deep, but if you looked inside you would see a rubbery hand reaching for the surface. Through the murky azure mud came the hand, followed by its arm. The hand clamored at its surroundings, pushing down on the outer edge of the basin, pulling along the length of the pillar, cutting its skin here and there in the effort. It was then- just now- that the hand was taken in another.

It is The Guide who pulls The Oaf out of the water. The large hairless man stumbles over the edge of the basin in a frantic daze, thrashing to get the slime off his skin. The Guide catches the weight of The Oaf, steadying him on his feet. “Easy now,” says The Guide, “you’re still fragile.” The Oaf grabs at the guide’s shoulders for balance, still clawing at the blue slime that covers him. The moment he could stand straight he sputtered for air. The Guide stands perfectly still. “Slow down,” he says to The Oaf, “Don’t do all of this at once!” The Guide gently lays the man to the ground. Free of gravity, he spasms on his back, desperately trying to cleanse himself. The Guide lets out a sigh and sits down in the grass next to The Oaf, putting a hand on his shoulder. “It’s uncomfortable, but you have to let it be. If you can’t do that, I can’t help you.” he says. The Oaf’s panicked breaths slow down as he stares up into the sky; he lays his arms down at his side, idly fidgeting with the cuts he’s only now noticed. His muscles relax, he coughs up the last of it and can finally breathe freely.

The Guide sits The Oaf up next to him and then stands behind him, pulling a soft gray cloth from a small satchel. He towels the blue liquid off The Oaf’s body. The Oaf only looks down at the grass, coughing now and then. Once he’s dry, The Guide pulls him to his feet and drapes a simple robe around his shoulders. “There’s no wind here, but it’ll be colder later on.” explains The Guide. The Oaf doesn’t seem to understand, but nods after a moment. The Guide leads them through the field, the both of them taking slow plodding steps. The Guide turns to The Oaf and asks: “Can you speak?” The Oaf tries but only moans. The Guide points into the

distance “Can you tell me what those are?” The Oaf squints toward the horizon and opens his mouth, his voice deep and monotone.

“Mountains?” he mutters.

“Yes, that’s right!” The Guide responds giddily, smiling at the Oaf. “How about this?” he asks about his satchel.

“Bag.” The Oaf declares.

“You’ve got it.” says The Guide with a nod. The Guide turns away and they continue through the field. The Oaf shoots The Guide a suspicious glance but says nothing. Both of them are silent as they walk, the fountain becoming an increasingly foggy vision behind them. After minutes have passed, The Oaf speaks again.

“Where are we going?” he asks.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out right now,” The Guide responds, from here, uhm, it should be...” he trails off. The Oaf continues with growing impatience.

“Where are we walking to?” he asks.

“We’re not walking anywhere,” The Guide explains, “This is for you to get more balanced on your feet.” The Oaf isn’t convinced.

“We go to the mountains?” he asks, one eyebrow raised.

“No.” he responds, “We couldn’t, even if we wanted to.”

“I want to.” says The Oaf “Why not?”

“They’re practically an illusion. No matter how long we walked we would never reach them.” says The Guide. The Oaf doesn’t understand. “Do you know that word?” The Oaf shakes his head no. “It’s something that you see that isn’t really there.”

“How?” demands The Oaf, tilting his head to one side. The Guide stops and thinks for a moment. After some time, he seems struck by an epiphany.

“Close your eyes and push down on them with your fists.” instructs The Guide.

“Why?”

“You’ll see.” The Guide says. The Oaf looks at him incredulously before complying, closing his eyes and putting pressure on them.

“This hurts.”

“Don’t push too hard, you only need a little bit of pressure.” The Oaf says nothing, but after a moment’s passed his mouth falls open. “What do you see?” asks The Guide.

“I don’t know.” mumbles The Oaf “I see a yellow ring. Little spots of light.”

“You see them?”

“...” “Uh huh.”

“But,” The Guide continues, “They’re not actually there.” The Oaf stands with his hands over his eyes before looking back to The Guide.

“Illusion?” guesses The Oaf.

“You’ve got it.” The Guide nods and smiles. “But now-”

“How does it work?” The Oaf interjects.

“The eye thing?” responds The Guide. “Beats me.”

“What?”

“I don’t know how it works.” The Guide admits.

“You don’t know?”

“Not a clue.” The Oaf is dismayed by this. “I don’t know everything.” adds the guide.

“Oh.” responds The Oaf. He thinks for a moment. “Who does?”

“I don’t think anyone does.” says The Guide matter-of-factly. The Oaf only seems more worried by this.

“Oh.”

“But listen to me,” continues The Guide, “put your hands back over your eyes so you can see.” The Oaf complies, putting pressure on his eyes. After a moment The Oaf responds,

“I see.”

“Try to picture the place you want to go.”

“I only see lights.” The Oaf argues back.

“Search for an image in the lights and you’ll see it.” insists The Guide. The Oaf stands with his hands over his eyes for another moment. “Tell me what you see.” says The Guide.

“A path.”

“Describe it to me.” The Guide demands. He closes his eyes as well.

“It’s a trail through the mountain, with trees everywhere.”

“What’s the path made of?”

“Crooked bricks, a winding path through the forest. There are stairs that go up and down. Tall rocky cliffs you can’t climb. A lot of trees, it’s dark, but the sky is bright. No grass, no

mud.” as The Oaf speaks he begins shivering, “It’s windy. The trail is cold. The wind is loud.” The Oaf’s train of thought is interrupted.

“This way!” The Guide shouts over the wind. The Oaf opens his eyes to see The Guide motioning to follow him down the path. The Oaf puts his head down to protect from the wind, wrapping the robe around himself tightly before trailing The Guide. “Great job!” The Guide says once The Oaf is in earshot. “We should get up higher, above the wind.” They meticulously push against the gale, carefully stepping up the first staircase along the path. As they ascend, The Guide holds onto The Oaf to keep the wind from knocking the both of them back down. After 15 paces the wind lets up just a little. It’s only now that The Oaf, agitated and out of breath, speaks again.

“How did we get here?” he asks The Guide, rocking side to side.

“You brought us here yourself, you wanted to go to the mountains, remember?” The Guide responds. The Oaf scowls and the two of them step onto the path above. After giving a glance in both directions down the trail, The Guide leads them up a small flight of steps further along, out of the way and caked in moss. It leads up to a small rest area with a table and chairs, all built from solid cobblestone. The Guide suggests that they rest here to catch their breath; the two of them sit at opposite ends of the table. The Guide looks out into the woods that live on the side of the mountain, each tree rooted into the stone. He sees layered paths below and above, the vertical length between each of them separated by clusters of trees, broken up only by the occasional flight of stairs connecting the levels together. Although the mountain continues wider closer to the bottom and narrower closer to the top, from where they sit, the foliage is too dense to tell where the bottom or top exactly are, a forest propped on an infinite incline. It is silent save for the rushing wind that continues below, crashing like a distant waterfall. The Oaf only stares down at the table, running his hands over the bumpy stone.

“Who built this?” The Oaf suddenly asks. The Guide whips his head over.

“You sure ask a lot of questions.” responds The Guide.

“Why not?” says The Oaf, glaring back at him. “Where did it all come from?” he continues, tapping his hands against the smooth cobblestone table.

“I’m sorry,” says The Guide, “it’s a good question, just not the kind I’m used to answering. I’m not really sure of it myself anymore, there was a time when we had better

answers.” The Oaf listens intently “In confusing times like these, people fall back on what’s easy to believe. If you really need an answer, I s’pose you could say God made it.”

“God made this table?” The Oaf responds incredulously.

“Well, no, a person probably made the table.” responds The Guide, “God made the mountain.”

“God can make mountains?” asks The Oaf. The Guide shrugs his shoulders.

“Sure,” he responds, “God made everything mortal men couldn’t.” The Oaf nods his head, seeming satisfied with the answer. The Guide stands and begins feeling at the wall the platform is propped against, looking up at the sky as he walks along. The Oaf watches silently. The Guide leans into the sheer side of the mountain as close as he can and peers up over the trees. “Aha!” he shouts, pointing into the sky.

“What is it?” asks The Oaf.

“C’mere, look at this.” The Guide responds, beckoning The Oaf over. The Oaf joins him at the wall, leaning forward against the cliff as The Guide had. Away from the mountain against the pale white sky, barely poking into view from over the edge of the trees, something large is suspended in the air. “That’s where we’re going.” explains The Guide.

“That?” The Oaf responds, mirroring The Guide’s pointed gesture. “That’s where we’re going?”

“Yup, do you want a closer look?”

“How?” asks The Oaf. The Guide holds up one finger to The Oaf and takes a deep breath before pushing into the edge of the mountainside, first his hands go through, then one foot, then the other, until The Guide’s entirely disappeared into the solid rock. The Oaf is shocked by this, but The Guide’s hand reaches back through the surface, offering to The Oaf. It is The Guide who pulls The Oaf through the wall. They hang in the lightless void of solid mass, not able to breathe or see one another, but the structure they could barely see a hair of before is all that can now be seen through the darkness. It’s a cylindrical platform shaped like a snare drum, the sides of it covered in ornamental etchings all the way around. The entire object seems to glow. The Guide pushes The Oaf back out of the wall before following behind. The both of them are a little dazed and uncoordinated afterward, both catching their breath. The Oaf rubs his forehead nurotically. “That’s where we’re going?” he asks again.

“We’ll head there soon, it’s just a bit more walking further along the path.” The Guide says weakly. He begins walking from the wall. He sinks back into the chair on his side of the table, yawning and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“How did we do that?” The Oaf asks. The Guide doesn’t respond, his focus breaking. His eyes slowly fall to the ground before he buries his face in his arms, resting his head on the table.

“What are you doing?” The Oaf asks. The Guide doesn’t respond, keeping his eyes shut tight. The Oaf sits back down on his side of the table and repeats the question.

“Could you just leave me be for a moment?” The Guide responds through his sleeves.

“I want to go there.” The Oaf says, “I’m sick of this place.” The Guide looks up, resting his chin on his arms he glares across the table at the Oaf before burying his face again. The Guide begins loudly snoring.

The Oaf stands and stomps over to the wall. He takes a deep breath and, one limb after another, pushes into it as The Guide had done before. Inside the wall, The Oaf keeps his eyes on the drum. When The Oaf held still he stayed put, but when he began pushing and pulling on the rock that confined him, he could climb through the darkness, slow and laborious as though he were swimming through plastic. As he gets closer to the glowing platform he becomes more aware of the breath he’s losing, desperately reaching out with each arm stroke as he crawls through the stone. He nearly loses consciousness, his body getting weaker until finally, still a great distance from the platform, he blindly grabs onto a ledge, his arm sticking out of the earth on the other side. He pulls himself out of the floor and takes a deep breath, frantically filling his lungs with air. He finds himself on another path further up the mountain where it’s narrower, a large portion of the platform visible around the side of the peak. After catching his breath and coming to his feet, The Oaf walks up the winding path toward the drum. The path gets steeper, as it goes along until The Oaf is almost climbing. Even after minutes of trudging up the path, not only does he get no further up on the mountain, but his destination seems no closer either, as if the land he traveled covered no distance at all. Eventually the path cuts off, leading to a sheer drop, The Oaf still no closer to where he was going. He leans over the edge of the drop, trying to look down the mountain in hopes of seeing the rest area and the guide, but the trees are too thick, the mountain too tall. He mutters to himself, “Illusion.” He puts his hands against the wall but reconsiders, still unsettled by his last experience. Dejected, The Oaf turns around, sliding back down the path. When the land levels out he wanders aimlessly, looking down at his feet. He

racks his brain, focused on recollecting. As he walks, the trees around him get thicker, his surroundings becoming more vague, the mountain's face obscured. The path that curls around the mountain straightens out, turning straight ahead into the distance, bordered by woods on both sides. Walking straight ahead, The Oaf closes his eyes, not noticing it when he comes to an intersection in the path. He crosses straight ahead, but when he opens his eyes he finds himself back in the field, mountains in the distance, the fountain to the side. He stands frozen for a moment, and without turning around, he closes his eyes and walks backwards, opening them to find himself on the path again. He thinks for a moment, examining the crossroad. He closes his eyes and walks forward again.

He walks through a long stoney tunnel, barely wide enough for him to fit in. There's a light at the end. As he continues forward, a sitting silhouette at the end of the path comes into view, outlined against the harsh spotlight. The Oaf calls out to the figure, it stands and turns, pausing for a moment before rushing down to The Oaf. When they meet in the middle of the tunnel, the sprinting figure of The Guide exclaims "You made it! I can't believe my eyes!" The Oaf seems confused, but The Guide embraces him. "You should have been lost forever. Straying from the line is how you disappear completely." The Guide says. The Oaf stands awkwardly still, not sure how to reciprocate. The Guide quickly turns away and begins back up the path, calling back "Come on, we're almost there!" The Oaf follows behind. When they reach the end of The Tunnel it opens into a large canyon, the sky above a flat pale white, the land below too far down to make out, but in the center of the canyon, away from and above the tunnel's opening, is the large drumlike platform. "That's it," says The Guide, pointing up at the structure. The Oaf stares up at it and speaks.

"How do we get there?"

"This is the hardest part of all." says The Guide. He steps forward off the small ledge they stood on and slowly walks up an invisible staircase, measuring each step as he climbed. Part of the way up, he turns half around, looking sideways down to The Oaf. "You must be very careful, lose your focus and you'll fall through." he shouts down, "Your first time going up, keep your eyes shut. Every step is as tall as the last one, don't go up more than one step at a time." The Oaf looks at The Guide dubiously and takes a few measured steps, starting slow. But after 4 steps, he began springing up two at a time, eyes wide open. The Guide's eyes get wide with shock and he shouts down to The Oaf. He turns back and races down the steps to take The Oaf's

hand, but in his hurry, he trips and falls through the staircase. The Oaf leans down from the step on which he stands and catches The Guide by the hand. It is The Oaf who pulls the Guide from a certain doom. The Guide gets his feet grounded, his eyes shut tight in focus, shakily holding onto The Oaf's shoulder for balance. The Oaf steadies The Guide and slowly leads the both of them up to the platform, taking each step together. At the top The Guide collapses, laughing hysterically. "You really are something!" he says to The Oaf. The Oaf doesn't pay him much attention, looking back down at the distance they'd just crossed. The Guide stands, thanking The Oaf profusely. He walks to the edge of the platform and stands beside The Oaf.

"What happens now?" The Oaf asks.

"There." The Guide says. He points to the center of the platform's surface where a glowing circle sits. "Step onto it and it'll take you where you're going."

"Where's that?"

"It's for you to find out." The Guide responds. The Oaf nods his head. "Wherever you go, I'm sure you'll do great." After a moment, The Oaf turns and begins walking to the circle. Before he steps onto it, he turns and looks The Guide in the eyes.

"Who are you?" The Oaf asks. The Guide thinks for a moment and shakes his head.

"You don't need to know," The Guide responds, laughing to himself, "There's nothing more you can learn from me." The Oaf gives The Guide a smile, The Guide smiles back. The Oaf turns away and steps into the center of the platform, a large pillar of light shoots down and takes him away.

The Collapsed Institute's Basement

Putting things back together had proven to be a lot of trouble, so I decided to let it all spill out over the place. It wouldn't be long until it was stacked so high that I couldn't see over it, but I wouldn't have it any other way. Once I was buried in it all, nobody would be able to see the tragedy. I would simply join the nameless mass of people who'd failed and be done with it. Tragedy happens in many people's lives, but never yours, never mine. Those whose theoretical paths to heaven had been tweaked and then abandoned, they are on the outside. As soon as the stacks piled up I would be able to join them, then nothing would matter anymore. Nothing ever really mattered, but soon nothing really *would* matter.

The foundations of the old building were still laying flat, hunkered down with shackles, imprisoning a labyrinthian pit. I would have liked to mourn the collapse of each floor, once stacked upon the last, but I couldn't shed a tear for every last one so I resigned myself to not one for any. Such care for so much, I had come to understand, was a privilege, a selfish gesture that could only be afforded when there was really nothing to worry about at all. I thanked my stars that it'd all fallen down. For the first time it came into sharp focus what really mattered to me, when I have time for just the one matter alone, myself. Soon, I thought, I would get rid of this too.

How many illusions had I humored? I'd considered my time very valuable, it was a duty to spread it across every individual concern, there could be nothing more admirable in a person than this. Staring down into what remained of the great institution, I was at a loss. It was all quite inconsequential after all, all but the last matter I'd held on to. Each roof that gave each room its character was torn off, leaving an unsettling display of the unwitting boxes I'd so eagerly believed to be the painted backdrops of my life. They were all just walls. Sawdust and suspension beams, as fragile and meaningful as a dollhouse. I lowered myself into one of these subterranean boxes and understood its contents for the first time.

These boxes, once rooms filled with characters, plotlines, meaning, its stories as ruined as those I'd been writing, another coveted matter lost in the collapse. After the first and last pages

were burned I'd found myself the discarded page on which I now write, fumbling for more story after what seemed to be a grand climax. Unlike each story of my own, written on paper, bound by leather, the one in which I lived could have no climax. The cruel publisher of my life would continue handing me blank pages. There could be no resolution, only more pages. With nothing left to write, I returned to where I'd found the only meaning I'd ever known- only to find boxes.

I wasn't alone, others had come back too, each examining the disturbed items of the basement, but I could not recognize a single face. People lived in rooms, I'm not sure what it is that lives here. I am thankful that the shock hadn't left any mirrors intact; for now, I am a person. I stumbled through the basement until I could find all that mattered: what was mine. These figures in these boxes cannot matter anymore. Surely, my study is not a box, it is still a room. Once I lived in it again, I would be certain of my own personhood.

The final matter was all that interested me. Once I had seen a room again, I would remember how to live. If stories still lived, then I could write more. Even now on these tattered pages, the show would go on. But at the deepest point I couldn't reconcile what I saw. What hope can there be of rebuilding rooms when even my study was nothing but a box?

All that could be left was to give meaning to boxes, and that was something new.

Residence on Top of the World

It was colder than expected. The bridge stretched out for what seemed to be forever over the deep blue sea. Large hills of snow lined the horizon as the sun dipped beneath. Halfway across the bridge I saw tired eyes reflected in the crystal road that carried me. At the end of the path, looming over me, the castle stood stalwart against the rippling wind. Stepping to the front gate, I considered knocking, but thought twice.

I stepped into the large manor. Each of its surfaces were made from solid stone, all carefully engraved, cut deep and fine. It was all new, no cobwebs, no dust, but despite the pristine state of the building, it didn't seem to house a soul. Through stone walls and under stone chandlers, past tall crystal mirrors and away from the blinding refraction that shot through the windows, I navigated further into the center of the structure. Further in, the rooms got less finished, the stone smoother and less detailed. The circle of light on the outer ring of the structure kept alive by fires and lamps faded away, replaced by a light that seemed to permeate the halls, a dim vision that stretched from corner to corner without shadow. The rooms were small, many had a function, like a sitting room or a small kitchen, but each one was built and designed only for one inhabitant, and many seemed to have no purpose at all. The length of each hallway connected the rooms like dots on a grid, checkpoints in a maze. The maze was deep and cold, with walls that only closed in on me tighter and tighter. The luminance that filled the air got more and more spare.

I had passed the threshold at which the distance I'd walked exceeded the ostensible size of the building from outside. The hallway I stepped through was longer than any before it, and after stepping through a 1x1x1 box of a room with a small stone end table holding an empty vase, the single corridor that followed slanted to the side. The entire structure was askew; the houseplan careened inward and tumbled downward, twisting into one point. At spots, the mansion looked more like a malformed cave, with cracked stone and hallways so steep they were more like shoots. Some were thrills like playground slides, but others were practically chimneys, bringing my progress to a crawl with each appearance. I'd pressure the walls that boxed me in,

carefully easing down into the next room without mistake, otherwise losing myself to the void which flanked on all sides. In the heart of the nest, where all roads converged, was a large empty room. A final rare light hung from the ceiling's center, showing what was cut into the floor.

I started down the staircase, determined to face what waited below. On the last of many steps, through the doorway at the bottom, I caught sight of what I'd come for. A twisted courtroom came into view, entirely askew with gravity. Pillars curled from the floor to the ceiling, bending with the warped surfaces of the walls. Against the back wall sat the only solidly built structure I'd seen in the last mile, a brutalist concrete throne seating a stout man, a dense tower of muscle topped by a thorny head of hair. He lay sprawled across the oversized throne, his joints crumpled up at uncomfortable angles. I stepped forward into the lost hall where only the sparest of light reached. The man opened his eyes, but didn't raise his head or speak. At the moment the space behind and in front of me evened out, I completed my procession and called out to the man. "Hello." I shouted. The man maintained his silence, seeming unimpressed by my effort. I stared at him. The man glared back before outstretching one hand and pointing at me. A small dot of light broke the dim sea, dancing on his fingertip. Its light did not spread, but only hung in one point. The man responded in a raspy voice.

"What?"

I ask the man where he'd been, why he'd gone away. He smiled and asked if we had missed him, I frowned. "You've isolated yourself here where it is cold."

"I've given up on you people, I can't get what I want from you."

"you haven't taken enough?"

"No one has what I want. I've done nothing but make up for losses."

The man swept his hand around in front of him, my eyes tracking the light's trapeze through the air before it reaffirmed its target on me. "Are you going to kill me?" I asked the man.

"I could. What are you here for?"

"Answers." I said. The man shrugged his shoulders.

"I've told you all there is."

"Why did you run away?"

"You call this running?"

He looked me in the eye for the first time, waiting expectantly for my answer. I nodded my head. He gripped the arms of his chair. He opened his fist and let the small marble of light

fade backward into his palm before crushing it in his hand, squeezing the glow between his fingers. As he mangled the miniature sun he tilted his head back and forth as if winding up before speaking.

“You think that I would run?” He waits for my response but I say nothing. He tilts his head even more. “You think I would run? I have nothing to run from. I don’t run away, I make *you* run away. I don’t timidly toe the paths that lie across the world, I walk *through* them. I scale the walls and do what I will. What am I running from?” He looked up at me again. He clapped his hands together, cracking the light into a room-wide flash whose warmth wafted past my face. “Huh? I am a king sitting on his throne, and you come crawling to my throne room, for what? Like a small boy hesitantly stepping into his father’s study. You waste my time with your little show and you can’t even answer such an obvious question.” He pauses for a moment as if to let me respond. I give the room a twice-over.

“This doesn’t look like a throne room to me? More like a hidden underground ruin. So deep in the world, almost like a hiding place. Right?” As the words left my mouth I could have sworn I saw his face contort in fury, but I would be blinded a moment later by the tendril of lightning the man whipped across the room, destroying the pillars that clung to the walls behind me, ending their desperate attempt at preserving the hall’s four corners. Half blind and half deaf, I scrambled forward out of the way of the caving roof, cutting down on the distance between myself and the man. As the earth settled behind me, the man laughed, leaning forward off of his throne. The decreased size of the room made it feel more like a personal office rather than a court, and we were close enough for the man to put his hand around my neck. He put his face to mine. “Who’s running now?” He asked. I stepped forward and embraced him. He pushed me away and leapt back into the air. I slammed against the rubble that had caved over the exit, and opened my eyes to see the man floating above his throne, pressed against the back wall. I opened my mouth but he cut me off fast.

“You sniveling brat, thinking you can coax me into- what? Repenting? You think you’re better than me?” I just shrug my shoulders

“I didn’t say any of that.”

“As if you’re not implying it with your perfect little face, here to lord your moral purity over me. You just want to look down your nose at me, don’t you?”

“What wrong have you done?”

“None. None at all, and you know that very well. Yes, it is something you know but don’t understand. I understand what you think you have against me, but I know for a fact that not one of you has tried to understand. You all just hold onto that anger, acting as though your conviction proves that you are righteous. But every second you lie there in the rubble like a dog, judging me behind your eyes, you only get more and more wrong.”

“You’ve done no wrong?”

“I’ve done nothing wrong and you know it. You know that I-”

“Then what are you afraid of?”

“Don’t cut me off!” He yelled, the muscles in his face scrunching up. “You know I’m not afraid of anything. You’re the one clinging to your life and you talk about fear. Talk about projection!”

“I fear plenty of things,” I said. “Right now, I fear you. But more than that, I fear that I will die before I can tell them where you’ve gone. That’s what scares me. What about you?” I stood to my feet and walked closer to him. I asked him again. When I got too close he stepped backwards. “How about we take a trip to the surface?” I asked him.

“Absolutely not!” He cried.

“Is that what you’re afraid of?” I ask.

“Absolutely not!” He insisted. He kept repeating the phrase, first to me, and then to himself. As he chanted his body heat rose, and he began to melt through the floor he stood on, constructing himself a narrow vertical coffin as he sunk into the ground.

“Absolutely not! Absolutely not!”

Against better judgment, I peered down into the liquid tunnel and called to the man.

“Are you absolutely sure you don’t want to come up to the surface? Certain?”

The man let out a deafening scream that shook the room. The hall fell through the world that confined it, tumbling into the hot core of the earth.