

CATIE O'LEARY

Visual Stories—Squirrel, 2019
Collage with antique engravings, 9 x 9 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

DAVID FELBER

The Long Stone Road

I began on a long stone road stretching either way to infinity. On either side was a vague green, grass, maybe a tree or two. The sky was blue and clear and yet I couldn't see the sun. There are no suns in this sky. I didn't pick a direction and headed off.

Presently I came upon a pillar by the side of the road. Standing by the pillar was an unimaginably old woman. The Oldest Woman. The grandmother of ancient. How did you get to be so old? "I practice several hours every day. On a good day I can age almost a year, although when I was younger I could age much more quickly." She sighed. "I was here when they put up this pillar. It took fully three weeks to carve its inscriptions, and in those three weeks I aged nearly a century."

I could tell she was going the same way that I was and knew that she needed assistance to walk. But she, being old, would be slow and a burden, and I, being young, chose to stifle the thought. I left her standing by the pillar. I don't know if she ever got where she was going. I don't know if she even left. I *do* know that no one will ever be as old as she was.

I continued down the road. The road continued through a pasture. I grew tired by the acre, silos full of sleep postponed. I lay down with an aim to sleep but I missed. A cow came out of the pasture and told me I had to get up, I couldn't sleep here, the pasture was for cows, maybe if I were a cow I could stay, but seeing as I was a person I had to go. I argued that I was lying on the road and the road was for people. "Even so," said the cow, maliciously, "you can't sleep here. I won't let you. You could go back the way you came, but I know that you won't. So just keep on moving."

So I did. After a time, the pasture gave way to a forest, as civil pastures do, stepping out of the way, as it were, but it wasn't, to let the forest by, to give it the road for a bit—the forest is getting on up there in years, getting old, not as old as The Oldest Woman but the forest is old—and once the forest passes by, the pasture can resume his pasturing without really being inconvenienced. Maybe the pasture was nicer than I was. Although its cows weren't very nice, to judge from the one I met. Although maybe there were other, nicer cows that I didn't meet, and it would be unfair to judge them. At not just any rate but quickly I was too tired to care. As soon as I reached the forest, I lay down and slept.

When I awoke, there were three other people. Other than me, and other than people. They had eyes, kind of, and faces, not exactly, but almost. They wanted to play a game and they needed a fourth. They asked me if I'd join them, so I did, into One who was Three. We played a game of cards, keeping score on our fingers, which made it difficult to hold the cards but that was part of the game. They won because they had more fingers.

Then we played games with the scarlet oak, and the sorrel trees, and the mushrooms, vast games of circumstance. At first the little mushrooms were good little mushrooms, minding their manners, Yes sir, No ma'am, Please sir, and Thank you ma'am. But as the day wore on they grew restless so we ate them.

After, I was sorry for the mushrooms and I cried my eyes with spores. The others joined in too and were inconsolable. The sorrels donned black garments and took turns delivering eulogies. Even the oak joined in, setting up one of his fallen branches in honor of the dead. The more we played the games, the more I became the more the different and the less the same, the more like the others with the not-exactly eyes.

And then I had to go. I bade them goodbye and took up the road again. Up up up, up the road, up the hill, up the wooded forest hill to the mouths of mountains. Big stupid mountains with their tongues hanging out chew with their mouths open, their cavernous mouths filled with pointy stone teeth. It's impossible to carry on a conversation with them. Ask them anything and they just stare at you, blankly, for centuries. Tease them and they cry up an avalanche, boulders for tears down their big stupid faces.

I'd have had nothing to do with them. But I was walking with the road, arm in arm, he and I together, and the road wanted time with his good friends the mountains, he wanted to visit the dumb lolling mountains, the Misters and Missuses Big Stupid Mountains.

I made it through the mountains into a desert. So bright! And golden. Brighter and more golden than all the suns that weren't in the sky. I met a heal-wasted coyote-ess, tired as virtue when nobody's looking, and offered her some of my lolling mountain water. She was grateful for the water, and seeing as we were going the same way, offered to introduce me to her friend the cactus who lived not two miles down the road, assuring me that she was "just the

right amount of prickly." Twitching her nose. "For a cactus, you know." I didn't, but I was happy for the company, and we talked about cubs and coyotes and rabbits.

Her friend the cactus was plump and green and, indeed, just the right amount of prickly. At first she regarded me with intense suspicion, as though I'd just as soon lop off her head to drink her (juicy green) blood. "And *who*, exactly, is *this*?"

"He offered me water to silence my thirst." At this the old cactus unprickled considerably. She insisted that we stay for tea, which we did, hot tea with little green cactus cookies, and regaled us with stories of sandstorms, and the blessed winter rains, and the vultures, and the lizards upon lizards of lizards. Then the road grew impatient to leave, tapping at his watch. And so, with farewells to our friends, we were off.

And then we were on again, I on the road again. There was more life now, more plants, grass and trees with bark and leaves. There was a cool wind blowing toward us, us the plants and the person and road. And there were people now, too, with round human faces and square human faces and not not-exactly-but-almost-like faces. And the buildings sparkling dazzling, reflecting what would have been the suns had there been any in the sky. And the ocean lay before it all, playful blue goddess, forever teasing the shore. I arrived at the city at the edge of the world. And in this particular direction the long stone road's infinity came to an end.

David Felber writes logic during the day and literature at night. This is his first publication of that second kind of writing. He lives, and writes, in California.

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