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The White Fires of Venus

Denis Johnson

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remembered the first pitch as it came breaking toward him, watching it as he had the day before, not trying to hit it, watching himself watch it. The crowd as always was full of itself.

As the bat comes around, repeating the past, he could see his wife Venestra in the stands behind a book called *What Comes Next*.

The fans scream his name as Hatchmeyer punishes the curve ball with his long-handled bat for all the bad times it had given him.

POETRY / JOHNSON, VAN DEMARR, HILLMAN

The White Fires of Venus / Denis Johnson

We mourn this senseless planet of regret,
droughts, rust, rain, cadavers
that can't tell us, but I promise
you one day the white fires
of Venus shall rage, the dead,
feeling that power, shall be lifted, and each
of us will have his resurrected one to tell him,
"Greetings; you will recover
or die. The simple cure
for everything is to destroy
all the stethoscopes that will transmit
silence occasionally. The remedy for loneliness
is in learning to admit
solitude as one admits
the bayonet: gracefully,
now that already
it pierces the heart.
Living one; you move among many
dancers and don't know which
you are the shadow of,
you want to kiss your own face in the mirror
but do not approach,
knowing you must not touch
one who is like that. Living
one; while Venus flares
O set the cereal afire,
O the refrigerator harboring things
that live on into death unchanged."
They know all about us on Andromeda,

they peek at us, they see us
in this world illumined and pastelled
phonily like a bus station,
they are with us when the streets fall down fraught
with laundromats and each of us
closes himself in his small
San Francisco without recourse.
They see you with your face of fingerprints
carrying your instructions in gloved hands
trying to touch things, and know you
for one despairing, trying to touch the curtains,
trying to get your reflection mired in alarm tape
past the window of this then that dark
closed business establishment.
The Andromedans hear your voice like distant amusement park music
converged on by ambulance sirens
and they understand everything. They're on your side.
They know exactly what you mean. They forgive you.

I want to turn for a moment to those my heart loves,
who are as diamonds to the Andromedans,
who shimmer for them, lovely and useless, like diamonds,
namely, those who take their meals at soda fountains,
their expressions lodged among the drugs
and sunglasses, each gazing down too long
into the coffee as though from a ruined balcony.
O Andromedans they don't know what to do
with themselves and so they sit there
until they go home where they lie down
until they get up, and you beyond the light years know
that if sleeping is dying, then waking
is birth, and a life
is many lives. I love them because they know how
to manipulate change
in the pockets musically, these whose faces the seasons
never give a kiss, these
who are always courteous to the faces
of presumptions, the presuming streets,
the hotels, the presumption of rain in the streets.
I'm telling you it's cold inside the body that is not the body,
lonesome behind the face
that is certainly not the face
of the person one meant to become.