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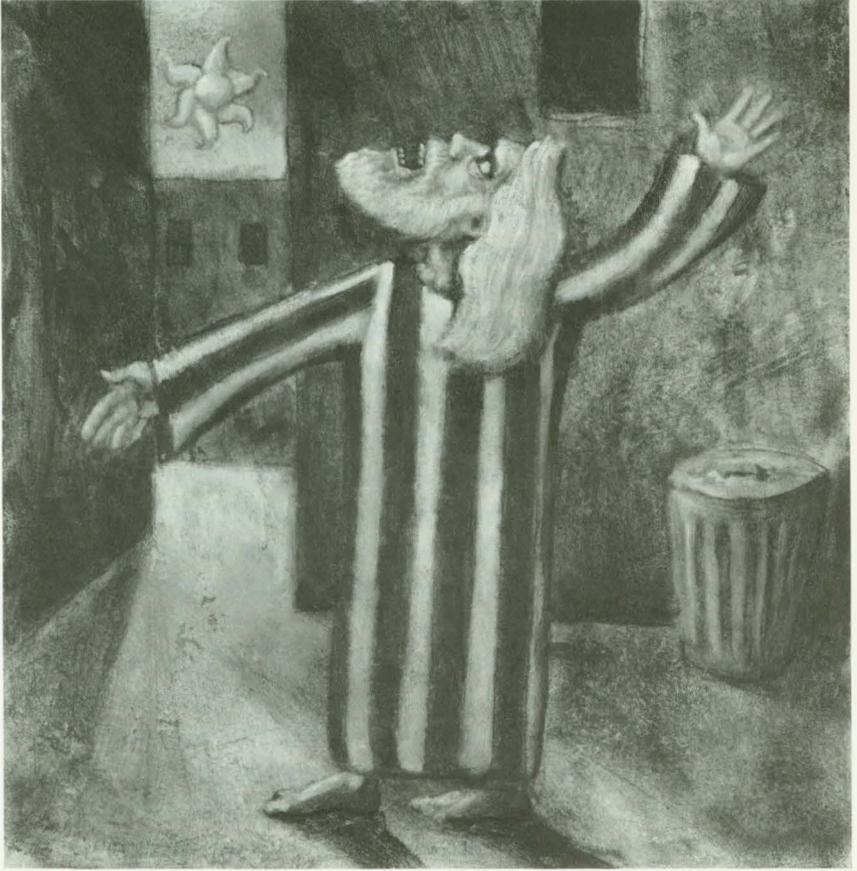
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In A Lonely Place

Kenneth Nishimoto

ZED STOOD ON THE CORNER OF 3RD AND 4TH streets, his arms outstretched, waiting for the rain to fall. It was a very hot day.

Zed knew he was crazy, at least he thought so. The woman on the bus had said he was "touched by the arm of the Lord." *Arm of the Lord*, he liked that, an arm strong with the hair of manhood. *Touch me O Lord and make me strong*. The rain would come. He would wait.

Earlier that day, seven Jehovah's Witnesses in somber capes dragging their children had stood at his corner. "A prayer meeting to commune with God," they had said; "when one or two are gathered in My Name, I will be there also."

Zed waited for his Lord. Nothing, only the heat shimmering off the face of the five-and-dime.

"Beelzebub! Beelzebub! Be—el—ze—bub!" Zed cried. "Liars and hypocrites who defile my holy temple. Beelzebub! Beelzebub!" The Jehovah's Witness women grew red as they recognized what he was yelling.

"God preserve us!" they cried, scurrying away. A few new converts unthinkingly crossed themselves.

"Hail Mary full of grace get me out of this place." Zed read that on the wall of the bus station lavatory. He yelled it now substituting "thee" for "me." The Jehovah's Witnesses scattered.

The sun shone hotter. *I will go into Thy desert O Lord, burn away my sin.* His outstretched arms and face were dark with sun. The sun would shine; the rain would come; he would wait.

A small child tugged at his robe. *A robe that the Queen of Persia, or was it Iran, had given him. Driven from Eden, the Lord covered the nakedness of Adam and Eve, even as I cover mine.* Zed's robe was now tattered and grey. *Stained with the dust of experience,* Zed thought. *Robed I wait O Lord.*

The child tugged tenaciously. "Who are you?" she asked. "Are you a prophet?"

Zed thought she imagined him with arms stretched against a parting sea. He laughed. "Moses," he said.

Her hair was red, pulled back with two small plastic barrettes. She wore a pink dress and spotless black shoes. *Youth,* thought Zed.

Zed recalled another place and a different young man with bright red hair. They had sat in a park together. "What is life?" Zed had asked.

"Life's a cereal, a magazine, a Milton Bradley game," the young man replied. "Have a baby, collect gifts, \$1000, \$2000, \$5000, spin the wheel. Life's a cereal."

Find a coupon. Get 25 cents off, Zed thought, Life gets soggy in milk.

It was good, Zed remembered, it was good. They laughed and talked and ended up at a beauty salon. The beautician gave them Coke and Bacardi. She shampooed and cut his hair. Her hands felt so alive. *A profession does that for you, Zed thought.* She wanted to dye his hair red. He wanted to answer, "yes," but could only shake his head. *Regrets like ice cubes in an empty glass.*

Now his beard was long, his hair grey and dirty, and he stood reaching for heaven. Zed was thirsty. *Pain, hurt me for you cannot hurt me.* "The world does not hold me," he shouted to the empty streets.

Oh Lord, fill me that I thirst not.

The small girl brought him a glass of lemonade. "I made it myself," she said. It was sour. *She has forgotten the sugar. Fittingly, for they gave the Lord vinegar.*

"Do you live near here?" he asked.

"Upstairs," she said pointing to the five-and-dime. "Do you want some more?"

"No, but thank you," he replied.

"Well, I will leave you now," she said.

A lady of consequence. He looked up at the window above the five-and-dime. *Yellow curtains, why do yellow curtains speak so much of home? Home, take me to Thy bosom, O Lord, take me home.*

The sun shone hotly. Zed raised his arms higher. *Rain on me. I shall draw down Thy floods. Earth and heaven weep with joy and anger.* Zed looked at the sun. It shone through his closed eyelids. *Flashes of eternity,* he thought.

The girl was back now, running towards him through the spotty haze etched on his eyes. She was skipping. Zed watched as she stumbled, legs twisted against the sweep of her fall. Her rhythm was broken only by her scream. In her small hand, she

held a white flower. Zed stared at her tears, then turned away to face the sky.

He stood alone, silent and waiting as the sun slowly died, dipping into darkness.

Bowing his head, Zed fell on his knees and began to weep. His grief filled the sky. Windows closed and a dog barked. Once again, Zed stood to raise his hands to heaven.

And the rain began to fall. Zed lowered his arms and closed his eyes. The rain grew, cleansing and anointing the Earth. In fury, it swept across the parched land. Zed's robe grew heavy soaking in the storm. Its dull greyness grew light and lighter, fading into a brilliant white beneath the rain's persistent fall.