

Garth Robinson

The Nibiruvian

On Saturday Marta and I are kayaking down Spa Creek when the sky makes a sound like a great stalled engine coming to life.

We're in the back of the creek. Around us the water is brown and flat and full of dead reeds. One thing I used to love about New York City is that it's full of gigantic, mysterious sounds, and everyone simply ignores them. But this isn't New York; this is Naptown, Maryland. This is the city where George Washington gave up command of the Continental Army. "Congress," he said. "I'd like to try the quiet life of a layabout."

Over the tops of the trees materialize four jets. They're moving as if on a fine, taut string. Although they're flying low, they appear miniscule. This is very incongruous to the sound they're making, which is like all the air in the world has been turned to gas and struck with a match. For thirty or forty seconds, all you can do is concentrate on the noise of the jets, as if they were navigating a path directly through your brain canals.

As a child, I often fantasized about this kind of sound. When I was eleven or twelve years old, I had a friend named Lyle whom I trusted and feared very much. Because he played video games, he knew an impossible amount about different weapons: rifles and handguns of various calibers, RPGs, howitzers, flamethrowers. He also had a mother named Anna Lou, who worked as a nurse in the emergency room. Whenever I visited their house, she would tell me horrible, bloody stories, many of which involved children being run over by cars. Once, she began weeping in the kitchen. "Always make sure your parents can see you when they're backing out of the driveway," she told me.

Lyle's life exuded a sense of violence and seriousness, and this made me feel as if he had access to ranges of information that were beyond me. One spring afternoon, Lyle and I were standing in the dirt lot behind the school. Although it was warm, Lyle still wore a fleece jacket. This made me wonder if I should put my own jacket back on. Unprompted, Lyle told me that he had it on good authority that the world would end on December 21, 2012.

"It's for sure," Lyle said.

That night I became so overcome with anxiety that I decided to pray to God. In movies and TV shows, I had seen children kneel in front of their beds with their hands clasped, like they were begging for

money. But I worried, because my family didn't go to church, that my parents might walk in and believe I had become some kind of religious extremist. So instead I sat criss-cross at the foot of my bed and held my palms together in front of my face. This way, I could pretend I had just been scratching my forehead.

Because it had been Lyle who told me about the impending apocalypse, and also because I was a fearful child who assumed something terrible would inevitably occur in my life, I took December 21, 2012, as my assured date of death. Important experiences beyond this date, like graduating from high school or drinking alcohol or being naked with someone, began to seem like scenes in a sweet and ridiculous story. When I thought of them, it was the same as imagining myself as a famous rock musician or an Arabian prince.

The next year Lyle and I were placed in separate classes and drifted apart. Sometimes, when I saw him, I tried to lead us into conversations that would prompt him to say more about the apocalypse. But I had the sense that Lyle had almost forgotten that we were scheduled to die very soon. He had the new idea that he would join the United States Marines one day. If my parents were gone for even twenty or thirty minutes, I would use their computer to look up details about Nostradamus, the Mesoamerican Long Count calendar, and the possibility of a collision with an invisible planet called Nibiru. A woman named Nancy Lieder had met the Nibiruvians when they came to Wisconsin to implant a pager inside of her brain. Some afternoons I could convince myself she was a crackpot.

During these years—as I counted down each birthday, each Christmas, as I watched the sliver of my life shrink thinner and thinner—I found that my most formative moments came at nighttime. I still prayed to God compulsively. I'd learned to do it by burying my face in a pillow and saying the words out loud. Afterwards I looked up into the ceiling tiles. When the moonlight, shy as an animal, came through the curtains, the tiles turned blue. In my head I organized them into neat, orderly shapes. Eventually, the tidiness of the shapes seemed to merge with the magic of my prayers to God. This was when I could trick myself into so fully accepting my imminent death that my brain began to sting and reel and constrict, as if exposed to a very bright light. My consciousness and field of vision filled up with blackness. I had to sit up and shake my head from side to side.

Because I imagined this sensation as a kind of dress rehearsal, I searched it out each night.

Time passed. I thought so often about the calendar that it became a physical presence, like a block of stuck concrete. It seemed miraculous that months and years still moved normally. When the date

was only a year away, I began thinking more seriously about my actual manner of death. The man who directed *Independence Day* had made a film about the 2012 apocalypse. In the film, most people died from asteroids, or from large structures like the Capitol Dome or the Sistine Chapel falling on them.

I entered high school. When I saw gulls far from the ocean, I interpreted it as a sign that the world would soon end. If we received someone else's mail by accident, I would think the same thing. These were the sort of anxieties my brain had resorted to. It made me feel as if I had been endowed with a tragic and magnificent secret. I was sure that I could now tell Lyle and his mother something new about the violence of this world.

Over time, I began to fear the seagulls and the misdelivered mail far more than the asteroids because I expected the apocalypse to be stranger and more unpredictable than I could imagine. This also made me think it would be incandescently painful. One night, I had a dream in which I had just woken from a nap. Outside it was late on a snowy afternoon, the backyard pale and orange, the kind of winterlight that burns you up inside. As I looked through the window, the sun fell out of the sky. A moment later it shot back up from the horizon. Like a waterbug skating across the surface of a pool, the sun leapt from east to west, from the very heights of the firmament down to earth.

When I woke from this vision I felt a great pressure on my chest. I believed almost everything about the dream: the strangeness of the world's end, its beauty, that it might arrive with the sunlight just so.

Yet there was something about the dream that struck me as incomplete. If the world were to end, the sun to come unchained, then the most terrible part would not be the light or the heat, the rings of fire or the oceans disemboweling themselves, but the sound of it all. The dream, for all of its obvious truth, was filled with an absolute soundlessness. This was the part that my brain could not conjure up, even on nights when I lay in bed and tried hard to work myself up. It was the part that, like believing in God, remained unimaginable to me.

When the day arrived, my father asked me, "Did you know the world is supposed to end today?" I had an entire language between my ribs. Not one of the words would make a bit of sense to him. This, I thought, must be the life of a Nibiruvian.

As we watch the jets disappear, I say to Marta, "Loud."

She nods. I say, "I feel sorry for the animals."

"Especially the bugs," she says.

We keep paddling down the creek. I wonder whether all the caterpillars and ladybugs and mayflies had heard the noise of the jets

and started to kiss one another goodbye. Now they've gone back to eating leaves and laying their millions of eggs. These are the blessings of a two-second memory.

In one of the parks along the creekbank there are men and women barbequing and playing music over a stereo system. We cross to the other side of the creek and paddle until we can't hear the music anymore. When we reach the end of a little inlet, we stop and float. Here the banks are overgrown, with fistfuls of porcelain berries growing low and heavy over the water. Ragged pine trees stand at odd angles, like old men who have wandered out from somewhere.

Across the inlet a blue heron sits way up on a branch with her wings drawn in. Marta points. The heron's looking out at us with a single yellow eye. It's clear that she'll be gone in a second, like some trick of the light. Never in my life had I heard of a sundog before I met Marta. Now I see them everywhere I look—along mountains and treelines, over open expanses of water, glimmering above highways in Virginia and Texas and Maryland. Dropped into the empty afternoon like lost coins. It is as if they were caused not by sunlight and refraction and crystals in the atmosphere but by the very sound of her voice. As soon as I write this, I realize this is something I really believe.

The heron takes off. From low down in the S-bend of her throat she makes a lonesome, affronted noise, as if she has finally decided to leave this world for good. I know the sorts of rackets that nature can dream up. I know about thunderstorms and earthquakes and avalanches. But in the silence of Spa Creek I can convince myself this is the loudest sound I'll ever hear.

Marta paddles over to a stand of goldenrod growing along the creek. She runs her hands through the plants. In the light, they flicker like a lit pyre. She says, "It's good to spend time with something rhizomatic." Who knew the dirt and the muck could hold such secrets. And how could I have known, at fourteen or fifteen, that I would live to hear the long gun of this heron's call, live to see twenty-eight years old, live to see Spa Creek on a Saturday in September, live to love this woman with her hands buried in flowers. It would've been the same, I believe, as whispering into the threads and the stitchings of my flannel pillowcase, and hearing a voice whisper back.

