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Otis Winchester

THE BENEVOLENT GLASS EYE

When the barefooted children hopped on summer's noonday sidewalk, the dome shimmered in the heat waves like a fiery, living thing—a May beetle, or a box-turtle, or an uprooted beet. And when lovers slipped out under the prairie moon on heavy nights, the dome sparkled like a benevolent glass eye keeping watch. It was the chorus of old folks who thought to ask, "Why did you build this in Kansas?"

The man who had built a Mosque in Kansas turned to the Saturday crowd of watchers from the scaffolding of an unfinished Minaret. (As an impressionable youngster looking in the dictionary to see if "mortgage" has a "t" in it, he had seen a blurry black drawing in the next column captioned: "Mosque of Sultan Ahmed I, Constantinople, showing Minarets." The vision of truth stunned and the boy stared at the drawing in a trance through the blinding afternoon. Hereafter during recess he traced in the hot dust images of domes; at lunch he crayoned his sack with silhouetted spires. Now the boy was by nature a frequenter of fields and river bottoms, and not bookish. But he began to divide his time between the prairies of Kansas and the pages of books, where he was occasionally rewarded by another glimpse of truth: one day, the "Mosque of Omar at Jerusalem.")

The man, who was suspicious of words and frugal with them, felt for the right ones to answer his neighbors. (The great domed Mosque amazed the barn-building farmers, who whispered, paced off its diameter, estimated its height with squinted eye and upraised thumb:

"It's eight rods if it's an inch!"

"Ten rods high or more!"

"Framed with green ash and oak . . . bolted 'stead of nailed."

"All faced with cement and stuck full of glass."

"He calls the thing a 'Mosque'.")

This was the moment of truth that comes to all prophets; it couldn't be ducked. But the man who spoke easily with shy, reserved people and who danced and sang songs and laughed with the children, wriggled mutely under their scrutiny. He had a prominent and aquiline nose,

full mouth, pursed lips, light brown hair, contemplative gray-blue eyes, and referred to himself as "luckily homely." He was slender and walked slightly bent like a trailing Indian and was acquainted with the clouds and an intimate of the meadow lark, coyote, and blazing stars. He called himself a "handy man," but wasn't considered very handy in any practical way, and prefaced every comment about his youth with the curious phrase "before I lost my senses."

Wiping the perspiration from his eyes so he could see them and stopping work to stop the blood pounding so he could hear then, he laughed good humoredly and began at the beginning: "We linger in manhood only to tell the dreams of our childhood . . . these are what little I remember." And looking across at the domed Mosque, the source of endless light, the articulation of beauty and truth, he said, "What I've built speaks for me."

But the curious crowd didn't hear because they couldn't understand; their thoughts got the better of their senses. The old folks asked a second time, "Why did you build this thing in Kansas?"

For a long moment the man's speech was paralyzed while the willingness to tell struggled with the futility of telling. He marked time by batting at the sweat bees, swarming around like thoughts. (The red sun bounced in the white sky, in the heat waves, in the blowing dust and chaff.) Words came like a visitation: "The earth is a ball of fire and Kansas is a blister on it. Our response must be bulbous and fiery . . . a dome stuck fast with glass . . . warm browns of Clorox bottles, hot greens of coke bottles, burning blues of Vicks bottles. . . ."

The moment for words passed. The cement drying on the man's trowel cracked like the skin around the unseeing eyes of the onlookers. The old folks who responded to their lot by cursing Kansas, beseeching a hard God for better things, shutting the world out with shroud-like bonnets—instead of building Mosques and Minarets—couldn't feel the beauty in the truth, or the truth in the beauty.

Then more words came. The man pointed around at Kansas like a weathercock in a dust devil. "We are all terrae filii. This is our Blessed Isle, our Elysian Field, our Garden of Eden. . . . We can't feel Paradise for thinking Hell and wishing Heaven."

To the old folks who thought about nothing but retiring to town, or better, fleeing to California or Kansas City, Missouri, this sounded faintly blasphemous.

When the man, stung by the sweat bees, desperate in his inarticulation, said, "This Minaret is its own justification, greater than a silo or

a grain elevator," the old folks took it as a nasty remark about wheat and turned away. A blind antagonism born of the prickly heat, the electric air, the hollow calm made them senseless to the man who called beauty and truth from a Minaret. Goaded by the fretful depression of a late Saturday afternoon in summer the old folks went down to their White Board Church with its eye socket windows. The sweat bees followed. Detached, the man labored in a green sky, alone except for a purple thunderhead.

They, who never lent an ear before, listened while the town idiot stuttered till his shirt was wet with spittle. The Mosque and Minaret were considered abominations to the God of the White Board Church. The man who built them they even construed a Moslem. Some recalled having heard him praying in a foreign tongue: "Labbayk Allahumma, Labbayk! Labbayk: La sharika-lak, labbayk! Inna al-hamda wa an'niama mata la-ka w'al mulk: La sharika-lak!" (In reality the simple words were as conventional as Sunday School: "Here am I, O God, here am I Thou without equal, here am I All praise and mercy is Thine: and all sovereignty. Indivisible One!") The idle jawing and tongue clucking paced by the overhead fan metamorphosed to invective while the afternoon passed to the rattle and rasp of locusts. The old folks prayed to the God of the White Board Church to destroy the Mosque and Minaret. But the Indivisible God turned a cold shoulder in the form of splintered rain and fractured lightning and broken moonlight. And the domed Mosque became a flashing, mocking eye.

Someone thought they ought to take it on themselves to tear down the Mosque and Minaret: "God helps them who help themselves." (As if they hadn't always helped themselves, drawn by the corrupt instinct: "And man shall have dominance.") They all thought the dome and spire should be wrecked. They shouldered crowbars, pickaxes, sledge hammers. And they tromped up the road like Crusaders plundering the East to smash the Mosque and Minaret.

Ordinarily the old folks were superstitiously fearful of a green storm blowing out of the southwest. This evening they were oblivious of the most violent signs from an otherwise benevolent God, splatterings of big rain drops and low white wind clouds. The man atop the Minaret, who loved nothing better than a summer's storm, had laid aside his tools to watch the snowball change to a dove's breast and that to a wine-dark sea.

When someone down on the road threw a bottle of strawberry pop against the Mosque (where it stained a bloody gash until sprinkles

washed it way) the man looked down, surprised at their audacity and ignorance. The bleeding dome, reflecting lightning and reverberating thunder, looked for the moment like the very eye of God, the egg of the world, freezing the maudlin hymns on the lips and the upraised tools of destruction in the hands of the fearful, the desiring, the egoistic.

There was no turning back, however, and after some hesitation the mob began battering away at the Mosque and Minaret. Sledge hammers cracked the masonry with solid thuds, pickaxes and crowbars holed and pried loose the cement blocks. (Carefully done, the materials might have been used again in a cow shed or the like, but done with vengeance the leavings were good only for stopping a wash in the pasture.)

The man in the Minaret shouted and waved his arms in the storm. But his cries and gestures were lost in the sky somewhere between Heaven and earth.

God, however capricious, is fond of a truly dramatic situation.

From a great domed thunderhead-Mosque a slender, screaming, hissing funnel-Minaret descended. The cyclone pointed at the old folks like an accusing finger and they cowered beneath the awful reminder of their nakedness before God. Confronted by such terrible, irresistible beauty the mob forgot its purpose. They ran to hide in the Kansas earth they vilified. Their going was a kaleidoscope of running figures and blowing clothing. A silo, a grain, elevator, and the White Board Church blew away.

The Mosque and Minaret were enveloped by rotating clouds and the whole made brilliantly visible by constant flashes of lightning that zig-zagged from side to side.

The man in the cyclone's funnel experienced a sense of pure beauty. Even as the Minaret toppled he experienced a final, intense moment of feeling, then perpetual truth.

Time dulls the dome like a lidded eye, and the loosened glass blown tinkling into the grass sparkles like tears on the cheek of Kansas.