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# ON A FRIEND WHO IS ON DISPLAY IN THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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R. Joseph Capet

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It was only once in New York City, where I had the fortune to discover in one of the byzantine back halls of the public library a statue, cast from blackened bronze, of a nymph balancing upon a log. The piece, so the placard informed me, was the work of a Frenchman, Moreau, whose name I only remember because it brought to mind Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. It is only as I recall the encounter, some years later, that the appropriateness of the mnemonic reveals itself to me in being applied to this statue—this vivisection of living girl and unthinking ore. For, in fact, the two Moreaus were not dissimilar in the extent to which they sought to play at God, or in their quixotic determination to cast the face of man from brutish materials. They differed only in the degree of their success.

Such was the awkward genesis of this distrusted immigrant, sequestered to a forgotten corridor near old *New Yorker* cartoons. Whether it was ill conduct, fear of foreign infections, or simple errors of paperwork that prevented her from taking her rightful place in the lustrous eye of American society I do not know. But she seemed to accept the injustice with a great equanimity, balancing carefully upon her fallen log, as a tightrope walker might take her constitutional or Anubis balance his scales. Indeed, she stood with an unflappable serenity, one arm extended toward the limitless arena of the stars high

above, the other beckoning the eye into the lilliputian forests far below her, and both suspending her tenuously between the celestial and the chthonic.

It was this, more even than the slender grace of her limbs, or her pixieish face aglow with the youthful joys of simple feats, which commanded my tenderest admiration. In the plane of her outstretched arms was encompassed the whole nature of man, perched between the earthly and the heavenly, and prepared to tumble off at the slightest provocation into inhumanity should he lose his balance to either side. Had I been wandering the library with Nietzsche in the off-hours of that sunny afternoon perhaps I would have turned to him and said, "You see, man is not your rope tied over an abyss. Here he is, attempting to walk the rope. Moreau has said it all already, in bronze."

She seemed very precarious at first glance, as though my sudden reverential intake of breath as I rounded the corner might have been enough to upset all her efforts, and yet for as long as I wheeled eagerly around her in a most distracting fashion, she betrayed not the slightest sign of perturbation. In fact, though I have not seen her in some years, I have every confidence that should you, dear reader, take it upon yourself to pay her a visit, she will be balancing upon that log still. How many of us can make the same boast? All of us have, from time to time, listed

ominously this way or that, our startled mouths assuming circles as perfect as those traced by our flailing arms, and not altogether dissimilar from those drawn in the sand by Archimedes shortly before his murder. All of us will, in the end, topple over embarrassingly, kicking the log into the grass at some distance on our way.

I think, sometimes, that may be the point; for this reason the Lord invested Adam with our wobbly, half-finished bipedalism. At the sound of Israfel's trumpet, when the skies over the little woodland spring of our world combust in red and orange, we are all meant to fall from the log on which our humanity teeters. Some, losing their balance, will ascend in the direction of this lovely sculpture's uplifted arm. Others, with a less fortunate footing, will follow her other hand's arc unto dust.

But not she! That patinaed beauty remains always upon her log, as a songbird upon a branch—the axis mundi of our humanity. Not for her the glory of her starward reach, the beatific vision of the God whose image she bears. Neither the ignominy of the clay which made the mold in which she was cast. Wars and revolutions, no less than the silent tremblings of our souls in moments of weak resolve, sprawl us in an endless lemming-like procession around her, and yet she stands. Either prostrate beneath her terrestrial hand, or exalted above her celestial one, we shall all put off one or the other of our natures; only she can remain in the balance which is the way of mortal men. Moreau's little nymph is, in this respect, a more faithful vision of humanity than are we, and will be human long after the last of us have become angels and dust.

*R. Joseph Capet is a graduate student in French-English translation at Concordia University in Montréal, where he lives with his wife. His future aspirations include graduating, completing a play on the life of Judas Iscariot, and obtaining Canadian citizenship.*