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Black Space

Gabriel Blackwell

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AVATAR

Evan Lavender-Smith

Six Gallery Press

<http://www.sixgallerypress.com>

118 pages; paper, \$15.00

In Evan Lavender-Smith's novel *Avatar*, there are no periods, no commas, no colons, no punctuation of any kind to direct our eyes and serve as spotlights in the darkness; perhaps they have been overlapped, "shielded" from our view:

I would time and again attempt and fail to recall what it was I had forgotten with respect to the fact of the so called empty space between the stars not actually being empty the black space the apparent uniform blackness between the stars in fact not actually empty the coincidence or the overlapping of two periods.

We thus illuminate the book with the flyspeck field of focus our eyes are able to maintain as they scabble for information in this 118-page sentence fragment, a single point of light in the empty field between stars that, though seeming so, is not dark but light overlapped, as the book's sentences overlap. The starlight that reaches us through the narrator, only the width of a quarter of a fingernail, is very possibly only a remnant of life, the result of a nuclear reaction that happened millennia before the fingernail's carapace, itself living tissue only in the past tense, widened to the measure of this light by being crowded out, overlapped by still living tissue pushing up from underneath. The rest is an omnipresent dark, so wide as to be immeasurable, so wide as to not even elicit comment, the effect of so many overlapped lights, individually tiny like our own but numberless, approaching infinity.

In 1964, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson discovered cosmic microwave background radiation, frequencies set waving at the dawn of time, or so it is believed, radiation which escaped the Big Bang. But to say that it was "discovered" is disingenuous: how does one "discover" something as old as time and all around us? Rather, they picked it out, decoded it,

and discovered its place in their hierarchy. They assigned meaning to it.

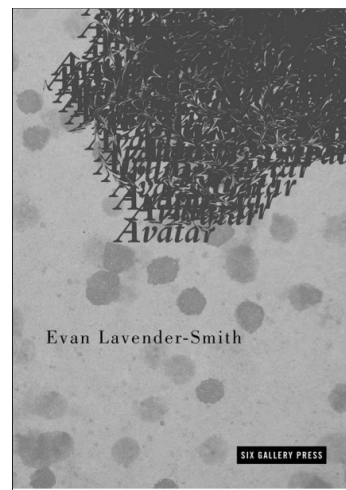
Avatar, Lavender-Smith's second book of fiction, undergoes the same process. It may be that this narrative, like the light of the stars, travels as both particle and wave: do we but try, we can begin at any point and reach it again as either crest or trough. "Friends" (are they the stars?)—discrete, the narrator is at pains to explain, different and noncontinuous with himself—are the subject of the beginning and the end. But a thought, a single, unbroken particle is our impetus and our vessel:

if not for the singular phenomenon of this particular something or other then the empty space would at all times appear entirely white entirely bright with stars entirely bright with starlight there being so many stars so very many stars that at every point at which I look in the blackness somewhere along my line of sight somewhere within the great depths of darkness there should be a star at that precise point very far away the so called empty or black space between the stars appearing empty or black on account of this something or other being there to prevent the starlight from reaching me.

This narrative, like the light of the stars, travels as both particle and wave.

It rolls on and on, discursive and barely comprehensible until it circles back around or goes on to something different, from which point the reader can begin to discern the limits of the space he's just covered. *Avatar*'s epigraph, from Søren Kierkegaard's journals, gives us the grid upon which Lavender-Smith plots his novel:

You always need one more light positively to identify another. Imagine it quite dark and then one point of light appears; you would be quite unable to place it, since no spatial relation can be made out in the



dark. Only when one more light appears can you fix the place of the first, in relation to it.

The agony of the narrator, who floats alone between two stars and thus fixes his own position before he begins, is not the question of where to locate some second light, the light by which his narration is fixed—it is here, in the telling, that that relationship is made—the question is not where but of what is it made? Who observes it, and how is it observed?

At the end of the human race, all of the history of our art, the supposedly everlasting appendage of memory, will be overrun, disintegrating right alongside its frail creators. In less than a human lifetime, the imprint of our most advanced technologies will be wiped away, paper, wood, concrete, even steel will reject the hand that bent them, return to their natural state. Only our nuclear waste will be left, the deformed, ugly light of manmade suns, slowly decaying and poisoning everything around them.

In this human-free universe, in among the cosmic microwave background radiation, TV signals and radio waves, the cultural waste of *The Shadow*, *The Tonight Show*, and *The Twilight Zone* will be zooming around the galaxy, forever and ever clacking the last evidence of our existence, until there is no galaxy. Samuel Morse had already entered into immortality on May 24, 1844, when he telegraphed "What hath God wrought?" into perpetuity.

It is a peculiarity of memory that without the right question asked of it, no matter how much data is collected, nothing is stored. There is some Penzias-and-Wilson of the brain, picking out the CMB radiation of our increasingly cluttered culture and showing us what has always been and always will be. *Avatar* is some cousin frequency, a light not to be overlapped, a star by which to find our relation to others. It exists so that we might begin to understand what it means to be a single point of light, in danger of eclipse. Let it and Lavender-Smith not go unnoticed.

Gabriel Blackwell is the book review editor for The Collagist. His short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Conjunctions, Puerto del Sol, DIAGRAM, Uncanny Valley, and elsewhere. He is the author of Neverland.

SUPER GENRE

SUPER

Aaron Dietz

Emergency Press

<http://www.emergencypress.org>

236 pages; paper, \$16.00

Aaron Dietz's *Super* is a study of bureaucratic restrictions and supervillains. And superheroes, too, though they scramble more than they super. The novel is structured as a series of escalating examinations to pass levels and garner promotions. Genre-wise, the novel takes its cues from the SAT and a Super Mario Bros. video game.

The two narrative strains are tucked into the work as reading-comprehension tests: one centers around superhero Robert, coaxing his love life along; the other finds Robert in his pack of superheroes. Being typical superheroes, they find themselves in shootouts attempting to save a water source from being poisoned. A helicopter reels and explodes. And

some of the superheroes meet nasty ends: "Edward was dying at the bottom of the canyon. Or maybe he was finished by now," reads one account. Worse, their actions are forever under scrutiny. Civilians serviced by these bureaucracy-harangued superheroes have the option to fill out a comment card regarding their experiences of rescue. "I would want to be saved by this superhero again," the questionnaire reads, and the customer either agrees or disagrees by filling in a bubble with a #2 pencil.

The language of *Super* is dry and static; if it's being reigned in, it's reigned in by something with

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