

# Zero Meridian

From Atlantis (2017)

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blood—your life depends upon lying close

Your flesh and spirit are still alive, buried inside the coffin of your skin.

I stepped onto Changan Avenue, and saw the long wall of green soldiers again. Everything was green: the soldiers, the tanks behind them, the buildings on either side. The sky was green, and the sun was greener still...My skeleton was shaken by a bolt of pain. I'd been struck too...Hot, sticky blood poured down my face. My hand reached out to touch my head, but couldn't find it...

Early morning. The sun hasn't even risen. Its rays are visible over the western mountains.

“We are now,” he continued, in that particularizing manner which distinguished him—“we are now close upon the Norwegian coast—in the sixty-eighth degree of latitude—in the great province of Nordland—and in the dreary district of Lofoden. The mountain upon whose top we sit is Helseggen, the Cloudy.”

You feel the morning chill.

Still no word from M.

On the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> he went weak. Sick. To the prison on Rhodes.

After an eight-hour bus ride from Istanbul to Izmir.

And then further south. A boat took him to Rhodes. The island of the butterfly valley.

Summer twilight. Time: a dim point in the first decade of this unpopular century. Place: latitude 59° north from your equator, 100° east from my writing hand.

You remember the butterflies as a huge fluttering sensation of colors.

As the old man spoke, I became aware of a loud and gradually increasing sound, like the moaning of a vast herd of buffaloes upon an American prairie; and at the same moment I perceived that what seamen term the *chopping* character of the ocean beneath us, was rapidly changing into a current which set to the eastward.

And then many years later. The boat you rode in while he slept on your knee.

You sat in the stern. Listened to the motors.

Didn't understand it was a second seeing until you reached the middle of the valley.

Even while I gazed, this current acquired a monstrous velocity. Each moment added to its speed—to its headlong impetuosity. In five minutes the whole sea, as far as Vurrgh, was lashed into ungovernable fury; but it was between Moskoe and the coast that the main uproar held its sway. Here the vast bed of the waters, seamed and scarred into a thousand conflicting channels, burst suddenly into phrensied convulsion—heaving, boiling, hissing—gyrating in gigantic and innumerable vortices, and all whirling and plunging on to the eastward with a rapidity which water never elsewhere assumes except in precipitous descents.

*sick*

everything hanging still in the

air

The feeling of the singing of the real world.

If only I could catch the feeling of the singing of the real world.

The sun's edge now fully lost. But darkness hasn't fallen yet.

Here lies the real, hard-core difference between latitude and longitude—beyond the superficial difference in line direction that any child can see: The zero-degree parallel of latitude is fixed by the laws of nature, while the zero-degree meridian of longitude shifts like the sands of time.

No sms to say he's heard from M. He said three days you say on the phone.

Don't start worrying until tomorrow.

Oh no...our world is only a bad mood of God, a bad day of his.

Then there is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know?

Oh plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us.

Dense fog over the mountains.

March 4. To-day, with the view of widening our sail, the breeze from the northward dying away perceptibly, I took from my coat-pocket a white handkerchief. Nu-Nu was seated at my elbow, and the linen accidentally flaring in his face, he became violently affected with convulsions. These were succeeded by drowsiness and stupor, and low murmurings of "Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!"

No moon this evening. No stars.

On Saturday September 28, 1889, representatives from eighteen countries gathered in Sevres, outside Paris. They were there to bring the world under the measure of a single meter known as M, and a single kilogram represented as K, to give their blessing to a particular ruler and weight..

The stone fortress. A feverish thought.

At 1:30 p.m. that afternoon, the officials loaded the “chosen ones,” M and K, into a triple-locked vault. At that moment, M and K, two of the most precisely forged and measured objects in history, the most individually specified human-made things, became, in burial, the most universal. What had been measured now defined the meter. M as one meter, no more, no less. From it, every other length in the world took its measure.

A sudden fatigue hits you again.

Documentary. A slice of your orange.

As if the body cannot wake up to the body’s time.

Most of all, they wanted to standardize time. From a master clock in the control room of the Paris observatory itself, situated on Rue du Télégraphe, pipes carried pulses of air—that is, pulses of time—under the streets to reset clocks throughout the city...

Twilight. Only a narrow streak of sun left.

...the British system of undersea cables to link clocks around the nation's vast empire. When a cable reached the shores of Recife in Brazil, Emperor Pedro II came down to the beach to witness the arrival of European time. Time synchronized to the globe's zero point, the Royal Observatory in Greenwich.

The crickets start up.

But the never-ending expansion of the time-unification zone continued. Cables snaked under the sea down the West Coast of Africa, landing at the colonial capitals, like Dakar. It crossed the seas and headed up into the Andes, wound down into Haiphong Harbor...Everywhere that telegraph lines could reach, the time signals did, too. Time, weight and length began to cover the globe: a planetary machine that would bring the world under one ticking clock.

You wake to the message that M is now on a boat.

Released from the Rhodes prison. Arriving soon at Piraeus—the port of Athens.

Never shall I forget the sensations of awe, horror, and admiration with which I gazed about me. The boat appeared to be hanging, as if by magic, midway down, upon the interior surface of a funnel vast in circumference, prodigious in depth, and whose perfectly smooth sides might have been mistaken for ebony, but for the bewildering rapidity with which they spun around, and for the gleaming and ghastly radiance they shot forth, as the rays of the full moon, from that circular rift amid the clouds which I have already described, streamed in a flood of golden glory along the black walls, and far away down into the inmost recesses of the abyss.

You hear the rooster.

March 22. The darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us. Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal Tekeli-li! as they retreated from our vision.

Three motorcycles drive by.

Hereupon Nu-Nu stirred in the bottom of the boat; but, upon touching him, we found his spirit departed. And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us.

In the evening an uncertain dread crawled over you.

But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.

That he would get stuck in a camp.

Forced to have his fingerprints taken.

These images of impenetrable whiteness need contextualizing to explain their extraordinary power, pattern and consistency. Because they appear almost in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing.

The clock's heart he says.

The sun's.

Anyone in the northern hemisphere could pick out their latitude—how many degrees south of the North Pole they were just by observing the North Star. But longitude—how far east or west one was from a reference point (like London or Paris) was much harder. Since the earth rotates, in order to establish how far east or west you were, you needed to simultaneously compare the stars above you with the stars above your reference point.

That's why hope must lie outside of "ourselves"

we must recover a connection

to the material world

even to ourselves

You drove through the darkness on the mountain roads.

After a little while I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a wish to explore its depths.

Volcanic ash he says. The black stone. The streaks.

M's eyes. Tired. Red-rimmed. Wide-open. In the photo he shows you.

How in societies as a presentiment of great convulsive events a formless vacuum can arise, moldable into anything—now will come a time of total lack of coherence, no words answer any longer to their previous connotations, time has opened like an abyss, everything slides, everything is a dark and disorderly flowing stream whose speed only increases, but without destination; rubble and splinters whirl over the darkness. What the maelstrom of the darkness actually contains, no one can tell.

Old.

Old some two thousand years or more.

The oldest living things.

You've never been here before?

No.

What do you think?

... people who were born and have died when the trees went on living.

Their true name is Always green. Ever living.

I don't like them.

Why?

Somewhere here I was born. And there I died. It was only a moment for you.

You. You took no notice.

Madeleine...

Madeleine. Where are you now?

Here with you.

Where?

Tall trees.

Have you been here before?

Yes.

When? When were you born?

Long ago.

Where? When?

Tell me, Madeleine. Tell me.

No.

Why did you jump.

I didn't jump, I fell.

Why did you jump.

I can't tell you.

Who told you to jump. What? What?

Don't ask me. Please don't ask me. Take me away from here.

Every dimension presupposes a medium within which it can act, and if, in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then, surely, another dimension follows—a special Space maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again.

He is the event that alters place he says.

As the world turns, any line drawn from pole to pole may serve as well as any other for a starting line of reference. The placement of the prime meridian is a purely political decision.

The streak of sun widens.

Lights up the dim pine trees.

The almond trees.

The whole mountainside.

The measurement of longitude meridians, in comparison, is tempered by time. To learn one's longitude at sea, one needs to know what time it is aboard ship and also the time at the home port or another place of known longitude—at that very same moment. The two clock times enable the navigator to convert the hour difference into a geographical separation.

The sun draws shadows over the red earth.

The dried brown grass.

The active quest for a solution to the problem of longitude persisted over four centuries and across the whole continent of Europe. Renowned astronomers approached the longitude challenge by appealing to the clockwork universe. Palatial observatories were founded at Paris, London, and Berlin for the express purpose of determining longitude by the heavens.

Four months of flight.

English clockmaker John Harrison, a mechanical genius who pioneered the science of portable precision timekeeping, devoted his life to this quest. He accomplished what Newton had feared was impossible: He invented a clock that would carry the true time from the home port, like an eternal flame, to any remote corner of the world.

Hot. Heavy air. As if the whole valley awaited the thunder.

“Yes,” he continued, with a contemptuous smile, “the blowing up of the first meridian is bound to raise a howl of execration.”

You drive through the mountain landscape. The high mountainsides.

Into a quarry.

See a baby owl sitting on the fence.

He thus disclosed the innocent Stevie, seated very good and quiet at a deal table, drawing circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable.

It flies away as you approach.

The carved-out yellow mountainside shines in the twilight.

One fell to musing before the phenomenon—even of the past; of South America, a continent of crude sunshine and brutal revolutions, of the sea, the vast expanse of salt waters, the mirror of heaven's frowns and smiles, the reflector of the world's light.

You hear the wind.

Then the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven's frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world's light. There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough there for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five million lives.

You see it move the trees.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, 1894, Martial Bourdin, a French anarchist, tries to blow up the Observatory in Greenwich Park in London. The bomb goes off too soon, and he dies of his wounds in the park thirty minutes later.

You didn't know where tears were to be found. Where in the night. Where in morning.

She was in the dark as to the inwardness of the word "Shame."

And she said placidly: "Come along Stevie. You can't help that."

It was as though he had been trying to fit all the words he could remember to his sentiments in order to get some sort of corresponding idea. And, as a matter of fact,

he got it at last. He hung back to utter it at once:

“Bad world for poor people.”

“Beastly,” he added concisely.

No he says that M replied.

Who Killed Cock Robin?

Who caught him with a shot and put him on the spot?

Who Killed Cock Robin? And vanished like a phantom in the night?

WHO?

Who killed Cock Robin?

I, said the Sparrow,  
with my bow and arrow,

I killed Cock Robin.

Who saw him die?

I, said the Fly,  
with my little eye,

I saw him die.

Who caught his blood?

I, said the Fish,  
with my little dish,

I caught his blood.

Who'll make the shroud?

I, said the Beetle,  
with my thread and needle,

I'll make the shroud.

The difference between the images of the battle which he had in his head and what he now saw before him as evidence that the battle had in fact taken place occasioned in him a sense of confusion such as he had never previously experienced. A sort of vertigo.

You lay down on the asphalt beside him on the mountain road.

Wait for him to catch his breath.

In the distance, we heard the Goddess of Democracy crash to the ground. Everyone yelled, "Down with Fascism!" Red signal flares shot into the sky, and suddenly the troops lined up directly opposite us. A dozen soldiers lay down on their stomachs, pointed machine guns at us and placed their fingers on the triggers.

"The people will be victorious!" my mother yells. "Down with Fascism!"

The taps didn't quite close any more.  
But she listened as if trying to trap what?  
The point between stillness and motion?  
The birth of gravity?  
Degrees of tension and attention?  
Then she pushed her hair back  
with the fluttering motion of her arm  
and turned again  
slowly, round and round  
counter-clockwise, like water swirling, turns and more turns.

I see scenes of a bygone war: the assault on the pass—Vall’Inferno—the 26<sup>th</sup> of May, 1915. Bursts of gunfire in the mountains and a forest shot to shreds. Rain hatches the window-panes. The train changes track at points. The pallid glow of arc-lamps suffuses the compartment. We stop at the Brenner. No one gets out and no one gets in. The frontier guards in their gray greatcoats pace to and fro on the platform. We remain there for at least a quarter of an hour. Across on the other side are the silver ribbons of the rails.

You sense the stillness in the mountains.

The rain turns to snow. And a heavy silence lies upon the place, broken only by the bellowing of some nameless animals waiting in a siding to be transported onwards. It lasts much longer, the night of time than the day of time, and no one knows when day will break.

The hot asphalt against your back.

I feel a wisp of dawn light fall on my eyelids. My body is like a bird’s nest that’s fallen to the ground.

He'll leave Athens tomorrow he says.

I'm not sure whether my eyes are open yet or not. All I can see are splinters of light, like those that scatter across a lake when you try to scoop out the reflection of the moon.