

once upon a time in Sumeria

by eamon byrne

Suddenly there was a crash of thunder, and they raised their eyes for the first time heavenwards. That was the beginning of what we call civilisation.

- adapted from *Prolegomena to Work in Progress* — Stuart Gilbert

It's the third year of the third millenium, in a location that was once host to an ancient civilisation, even if the tectonic plates have shifted slightly. It's a day like any other, with the sun high up in the sky, and dust rising from ochre alleyways, and a smell of diesel, and the cries of children and chickens and street vendors mingling, and an old holy man is calling from a tower. To the tourists, suited up in kevlar and bullet-resistant armour, the scene appears benign, a sunny locale exotic to cashed-up visitors. They take it in with the faintest bemusement — they've come from their own ghettos far stranger than this. The people here wear funny clothes, speak in unfathomable voices, but nothing about them, unless it be their averted eyes, indicates they're harboring untoward concepts of the godhead. They're mainly old, stooped and head-covered, and around them a new generation can be seen running along the street towards the tourists' handycams, young boys, girls, their teeth flashing smiles, their bright eyes sparkling.

Then something happens. It appears that some of the older ones are looking up and seeing something. What it is is not known at this point, for it is hardly a shape, barely even a shadow, passing across the sun, and the passing is but brief, a few pulses, three seconds

and twelve milliseconds if one were counting, but noone is counting, and so noone is imagining that the sun in the grip of a demon, whose wings are blocking out the sun, and yet a sense of foreboding is being cast upon them by this brief and inexplicable shadow, so deep and dim they'll remember it for a lifetime. Those that live that long. And if, as with any eclipse, most turn away from the brightness of it, others don't. Those are the ones that keep looking up, but slightly away, to the blue, until their eyes have adjusted to the sky — by which time the shadow has passed on, and they can see the black dot, coming down. It's coming down, and down, and spiralling, spiralling. And as it spirals it grows bigger and bigger. That's when they notice it's spiralling. At first it was only a dot. It was only a spiralling dot at first but at some point it becomes something else, a spiralling massive ordinance air burst or moab. Otherwise known as the mother of all bombs.

They scatter.

It's what you'd expect. It's what they have in common with us. The looking up in awe, the terror at the sight of the spiralling and growing dot, the sudden imagining of what is to come. It touches some inner nerve in some inner core. They've experienced it before, and at this moment of dot-recognition they realise they're about to experience it again.

From the pilot's position looking down he can see the enemy scattering and the feeling is like from here to eternity just before the shithouse goes up. It's mother to base and not waiting for the shock waves, it's flipping open the can of Coors and high fives, Roger this and copy that as he puts the ship into a steep bank and they're out of there, last thing seen the tail disappearing into a hole in high far thunderhead. Sun streaming through. Then the cloud closes up and on the static just a voice saying *we'll show em shock and awe* drifting away to nowhere, a final click and a copy captured for historical purposes so later analysts and other prurient eavesdroppers can play it back on the dvd.

This is the beginning of what we call democratisation. Our gift to them. Special delivery. Air mail. Pleasure is all ours. Quiet falls the

dot. It takes quite a while for the dot to fall down from thirty thousand feet.

