

ROBIN JONES

Alone Into the Alone

On the afternoon of March 20th, the day that marked the vernal equinox of 1994, the body of Robin Jones, 34, was discovered by a hiker in Ae Forest, Dumfries and Galloway. Found lying in a stream bed at the foot of an overhang of some 40 feet, Jones was initially presumed to have been the victim of an accident. This cause of death was subsequently revised, however, owing to the discovery of a makeshift camp nearby.

Further to extensive provisions of food and water, there were discovered at the camp two items of significant interest: a JVC GR-AXM800U compact-VHS camcorder and an Olympus S830 dictation recorder, both carefully wrapped in a single tarpaulin. Inspection of the camcorder revealed a video cassette containing four recordings of approximately six minutes and one shorter recording of twenty-four seconds. Each was digitally marked with both time and date. Inspection of the dictation recorder revealed an audio cassette containing upwards of a dozen recordings. Unlike the video, the audio contained no digital time imprint.

The transcripts that follow represent the unabridged contents of the audio recordings found at Jones's camp. They appear here accompanied by stills from the video cassette. Though filmed in colour, most of the images appear in near black and white, a shortcoming resulting from the high contrast levels of the recordings. Both video stills and audio transcripts are reproduced here with the permission of Jones's only surviving relative, his sister—hereafter referred to as J—on the condition that it be noted

in these introductory comments that permission was given contrary to her own inclination but in accordance with what she believed to be her late brother's wishes.

Further to this permission, J also gave one piece of editorial advice regarding Jones's recordings, namely, that she believes he intended the audio and video elements to be considered together, i.e. with the audio functioning as a voiceover to the video. Though impossible to confirm this hypothesis with any confidence, the similar total duration of both elements make J's suggestion a plausible one. As such, and at J's request, the two elements have been presented with this editorial concern in mind.

II

Video Still: 01:22, 21/6/1993



The first video clip lasts a little under six minutes. Filmed at night, the frame is almost entirely black excepting a small, single light in the distance that lies off centre and to the right of the frame. Close inspection of the video

reveals a vague outline of tree tops discernible on the left and in the centre of the frame; a hill-top horizon appears on the right above the light. (June 21st was the summer solstice of 1993.)

Audio Transcript

(Very little background noise, Jones is speaking in a whisper. Here, as in the other recordings, Jones occasionally sounds rehearsed/performative. Significant pauses in Jones's speech are indicated with a dash [—].)

JONES: *A light in the distance. Doesn't seem to be moving. I*

haven't come far enough.

This is where it starts. Today's the day the earth's axis is at its most inclined towards the sun. Maximum axial tilt; estival solstice; summer. Longest day of the year, strongest light of the year. For us in the northern hemisphere, I mean. Over the next six months the sun will fade; the hours of light will shorten; the axis of the earth will incline away.

I don't mean that obliquity changes, that's not what I mean. The earth's orientation relative to the stars doesn't change or anything. Or, it does, of course, but with obliquity we're talking tens of thousands of years, not seasons. Right now, we're talking annual; a single orbit of the sun. The fact that soon we'll be moving towards the second solstice. Southern hemisphere's estival; our hibernal. Winter is what I mean. That's what all this is for; the darkest day, the longest night. The definitive absence of the year.

The light in the distance and the light in the day mean the same. I have to move deeper into the forest.

Video Still: 05:03, 21/06/1993



(Recorded the same morning as the first, though some hours later, this clip lasts 6 minutes precisely, running from 05:01 to 05:07. It is clear that Jones has changed location in the intervening hours.

Given the contrast in this clip, it is difficult to make out any details other than the outline of the surrounding trees. The framing and light suggests that Jones is looking slightly uphill and, most likely, to the east. Sunrise took place at 05:35; the earliest of the year owing to the summer solstice.

The frame, therefore, shows Jones's view during the final minutes before the sun appears over the horizon.)

Audio Transcript

(Background noise suggestive of light rain. Jones sounds relaxed; this is the most conversational of his recordings.)

JONES: *Mithridatism. The practice of self-administering small, non-lethal amounts of poison; the idea being that you protect yourself against future exposure. Name comes from Mithridates the sixth, King of Pontus; the one who was a real thorn in the paw of the Roman Republic. Responsible for the Mithridatic Wars, hence the name.*

All came about because of his dad, Mithridates the fifth. He was poisoned and so the son wanted to protect himself from being killed the same way. Idea was to take a little poison each day to get used to it. Habituate. Worked, too; worked too well, in fact, because the inevitable day came when Mithridates wanted the poison. Needed it. And for original purposes, I mean; death not habituation. Suicide, is what I'm driving at here. And thing was when he wanted it, it didn't work.



64 BC—and this, by the way, came after a whopper of a military defeat and some serious family betrayal—Mithridates had fled to Panticapaeum and was surrounded by enemies. Trouble was, the city's council didn't have much in the way of fight left in it and so, in the face of the advancing army, they just went and submitted voluntarily. Right off the bat, submitted. Which left Mithridates in some serious bother. In other words, he knew the end was coming and that it was only a matter of time. If not hours, days. Max. And, so, he decided to take his own life—the aforementioned suicide—but his plan snagged from the get-go because hearing of his plot, his daughters demanded that they be allowed to accompany their dad into the afterlife and so Mithridates, thinking he was sparing them from a debauched approaching army and daughters being forced to marry conquerors and etcetera, he went and mixed poison for all three, and we all know what's coming here: the daughters died immediately, and Mithridates, because of his immunity, just shrugged it off like it was a head cold or something. In the end, one of his guards had to decapitate him with a

sword. At his request, I mean.

Point is though, it worked. Didn't go to plan, but the original premise—the poison tolerance theory—proved sound. What I'm getting at is that this trip into the alone is the same. For me, I mean. It's like a little poison just to start things off, to get things going. A small act of being alone and it'll act upon my mind and blood and ligaments and soul even. And when I'm habituated, I'll test my resilience to a real dose. A lethal one. And then we'll see.

Audio Transcript

(No background noise, silence.)

My father lived alone. I'm like him, I think. Loneliness killed him, took him in a way that meant he went from loneliness into the definitive alone. Into full non-attendance. The Mithridates father-son pairing had poison; this Jones pairing has loneliness. Or now just me, owing to the old boy fully non-attending these days. Plan is to escape the old boy's fate, like Mithridates the younger; the sixth. 'Course, you can argue Mithridates didn't escape it, but that would be ignoring the main take away from the miserable ending which is that he was onto something with this poison theory. And so, if he was onto something, chances are good that I am onto something too. I won't die the same way as the old boy is what I'm driving at. Here, in this forest, I'll be alone and then, when it comes to the journey into the definitive alone, I'll be ready for it. For me it will be merely more of the same. Alone into the alone, through it, and out the other side.

Audio Transcript

(Some background noise suggestive of a slight breeze. Occasional birdsong.)

Morning's on its way again. Out here, you start to appreciate the different qualities of twilight, its different character movements. You feel the moment the sun passes 18°, deep below the horizon, and how the night lets out the breath it's been holding to let you know that this is it: astronomical dawn.

To the untrained eye there's no perceptible change but for a twilight disciple it's obvious. Death blow. Coup de grâce.

Imagine this one: a deer just grazing in a clearing, nibbling at shoots or whatever but with a rifle trained on it and a hunter on the end of the rifle who's just squeezed the trigger. What I mean is, the deer isn't aware that the tip of a bullet moving a thousand metres per second has just made contact with the fur on its neck; the deer's reality hasn't had time to embrace the reality of the bullet yet. But even then a change has occurred somehow. The hunter can feel it. It's true he couldn't describe how the change is manifest but it's also true that he'd absolutely, definitely swear that the change is there and that he felt it the moment the bullet left his gun. Like a qualitative shift or an instinct frozen in time or like a promise that the deer's already wide eyes will—in the minuscule future; minuscule to the point of infinite right now—widen even further and in real fatal surprise. To the hunter, the deer is already a former deer: the bullet has done its work in advance.

In the twilight business, I'm a bit like that hunter. I've followed the night. Got to know it and its habits, got to learn its instincts for myself. Now I know the night as well as anyone. Better even.

When the sun is 12° below the horizon we get the second dawn of the morning—in the twilight business it's called nautical dawn—traces of illumination aren't easy to pick up yet, but they'll intensify as nautical twilight progresses. Soon the signposts in the sky for nocturnal navigation will begin to fade into the golden-blue noise of the morning. Nautical dawn is nice, pretty—even to me.

But the day quickly sweeps the night away. Imperfections rush in; imperfect somethings where before there was only clean nothing. You see, at 6°, the nautical twilight is over, replaced by civil dawn. The sun's not up yet, but it's all over the sky already. From here, the dark pulls back altogether until you no longer need electric light to find your way around out of doors. Reds and oranges bleed up until the sun passes 0°, breaches the horizon, and forces itself upon the sky. True dawn; sunrise.

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The alone of the night is over and the together of the day begins.

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The day—the Great Together. The enemy of the Great Alone.

III

Video Still 3: 14:07, 23/09/1993



(September 23 was the autumnal equinox of 1993. The time 14:07 represents solar noon, i.e., the moment the sun is highest in the sky. The clip lasts for 6 minutes, starting at 14:05 and finishing at 14:11. The lens is focussed on the sun in

the sky as it passes its highest point. The six months that follow the autumnal equinox are, in Jones's words, 'the dark half of the year'; the duration and intensity of light reaching its nadir on the winter solstice.)

Audio Recording

(Little discernible background noise.)

JONES: *This is solar noon; the moment the sun transits the celestial meridian. A sort of a sacred time for me; a declaration of the worst being over. Or that it won't get worse than this, I mean. In other words, this self-delusion that everyone else buys into is at its peak and from here on in it can only decline. Won't survive. The sun's on its way out, is what I mean. The great together has tried another time and another time it's failed. From noon onwards my thoughts can turn to preparation for the night; for the dark and the great alone.*

Audio Recording

(The sound of strong wind. Jones is speaking at a high volume,

though occasionally his voice is obscured by the wind.)

JONES: *Three months now. Three months. Insignificant really, but to be in the middle of it is more than I...* (inaudible).

—
Compared to eternity, to the definitive alone, it's nothing; this is what I came for. I'm becoming part of it already, I think. Allowing it in.

—
I'll sleep during daylight hours now; during the hours of company and communion. Or when the others commune, at least, though what... (inaudible).

From here on in, I wake only for the night.

Audio Recording

(There are frequent pauses in Jones's speech during which the listener can hear the rustle of his waterproof clothing. Jones speaks quietly in this recording and sounds less sure of his words. Frequent sniffing reveals, perhaps, a cold.)

My judgement is off, I think; tonight I hurt my ankle in a fall. I've been here all these months, I know this landscape better than anyone but I still managed somehow to fall. It was on the embankment to the west of camp, a rabbit hole. It's minor really, not significant, just a limp. It'll go soon. But something else happened and it worried me a bit.

—
Worried me a lot, really.

—
Not the injury, but my reaction to it. For a moment my body sort of rejected what was going on. I don't mean it rejected the pain—that I felt—I mean it rejected the experiment for a moment, and that I thought of home. There was the pain in my leg and the panic had me scared and it made me sort of long for the comfort of civilisation; warm beds and hot tea and some mindless television and mashed potato and I have a favourite jumper that I wear around the house, and Christmas with my sister—which is stupid because I've always hated Christmas with my sister, and then I felt bad about having never hidden the fact that I hated it—and I longed for these things in a very normal person

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way. In a way I never longed for when they were there in front of me—and definitely not in a normal person, great together sort of way—and then very quickly I felt isolated out here.

And I feel like it all came about because of one sprained ankle, as if the desire for comfort is all too soon the desire for company, togetherness, life among the crowd and the definitive together, and if that part of me is still here now, then what's going to happen when I finally go into the definitive alone?

Which means I'm not cured of all my sentimental weaknesses yet, not even now after all this time, and that I need to be stronger because if I confront the great alone with that weakness still in me, I haven't a hope. Only someone who's already truly alone will ever conquer it; will ever go through it and come out the other side. Stands to reason. Obvious.

Audio Recording

(Jones sounds anxious, in a hurry. This is the only recording in which background noise suggests that he is walking or, perhaps, jogging.)

JONES: Walked further today. Discovered a train track. Communication. Company. I must move deeper into the forest.

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence.)

JONES: Sunlight doesn't penetrate here, the dark beneath the trees. Still, I should be sleeping. Even the day is practice for the darkness. Isolation is right here, it's with me now, and the sentiments that betrayed me before—the ones I thought I'd buried—have now begun to truly leave. The longing for others; I can feel it going, leaching out of me.

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence. Jones speaks quietly and occasionally sounds younger than his 34 years.)

When it was just my sister and me and my dad we were sort of happy,

I think. Even though it was difficult when my mum died; but that's not the point really, the point is that a strange thing happened when my mum died—I was about seven—and that thing was that I became afraid of the dark. Scared of it, so that at night I'd sneak from my room into my big sister's room, knowing she would let me into her bed; knowing that if I tried to get into my dad's bed he would just wake up and walk me back to my room and show me that there was nothing to be afraid of, and he'd be really reassuring and everything, but he wouldn't ever realise that the scary thing was really just the alone and that showing me there was nothing just made things worse.

I can't remember how it went away in the end. I kind of think it never went. Maybe it was just that my sister left for university the following summer. Now, when I look back, I'm pretty sure that I was waking at solar midnight—the moment right between sunrise and sunset, the moment furthest from light, the deepest dark.

When the moment comes, it'll be solar midnight on the night of the winter solstice. The moment furthest from light on the longest night of the year.

IV

Video Still 4: 15:47, 21/12/1993



(The clip runs from 15:45 to 15: 51. This video was recorded precisely an hour before sunset which took place at 16:48. December 21 was the winter solstice of 1993—Jones's avowed 'target'. The night that followed this sunset

was, therefore, the longest of the year.)

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence.)

December has a special light. A last light. In deep winter months the sun hangs low in the sky; solar noon's barely 10° above the horizon. Prolonged twilight, then prolonged dark. I think now about the eternal twilight of the polar circles. Sometime in October the sun sinks deeper than 18° below the horizon and that's it. From that day on there's no civil twilight, no nautical, no astronomical. Five months of polar night. Total absence. That's purity. That's really something.

But if you're doing it here, now is the only time for an experiment like this. In an hour precisely it'll be sunset. 16:48, civil twilight begins. 17:34, nautical twilight. 18:21, astronomical twilight. And at last, at 19:06 it will be night. Twelve hours of night. More. For me, tonight, this is my polar circle.

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence.)

Something isn't right, something is missing. Or present.

Something is present. Something is here.

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence. Jones is speaking quickly.)

JONES: I was wrong; I was premature. Longing left me, but now I realised that when it left it was replaced. And replaced by hate. I don't long for the together anymore, but I've allowed myself to hate everyone who can't live without it. And what is hate for others if it's not love for myself? I thought the polar night was the end of it, some sort of summit to my climb. Now I realise that it was a false summit.

All these months of preparation and now I discover the hate and love. It has been with me all along. Something where I need nothing. There's work to do, but not much time. When the hate leaves me, the great

together will leave me too.

—

Or perhaps it will be another false summit. I won't know until I stand at the peak. It has to happen tonight.

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence.)

JONES: *This is not an accident but part of the process. Part of the movement into the alone. I've known it all along, why did I let myself forget? My judgement's off, maybe.*

—

Who else has done this? No one. No one has come through the other side. That's the challenge, the science, the religion of the thing.

Audio Recording

(No background noise. Silence.)

I was stupid, I realise that now. Words kept me here. Words and video and memories. They're all part of it; a link to the together. An acknowledgement. I thought it was for posterity; believed it was. But now I see it for what it really is: unwillingness.

—

Leave it all behind. Forget. Alone into the alone.

Audio recording

(No background noise. Silence. The recording captures no dialogue. It lasts for approximately six minutes.)

V

The above audio recording marks the end of Jones's testimony. Even so, there is one recording that the reader has yet to see. An outlier to the above, the short video clip does not originate from the period of Jones's journey into the isolation, but was made a number of weeks earlier, on May the 24th, 1993.

Depicting a leafy background similar to those in his testimony,

the clip lasts only twenty-four seconds and is unexceptional but for the last few frames. Here viewers are confronted first with a hand and then—for a brief instant before the recording is cut—with Jones's face, slightly obscured by the hand reaching toward the lens. The filming appears accidental; it is possible that Jones dropped the camera and that he was not aware it was recording.

What took Jones into the forest at this earlier date is unknown, though for reasons of completeness—and with J's permission—a frame from this clip is here included. It is, to the best of her knowledge, the only surviving image of her brother. The clip appears at the very start of the video cassette discovered at Jones's camp. It ends where the first testimony clip (recorded June 21, 1993) begins.

Most likely we owe its existence to little more than practicality: Jones, it seems, chose not to record on a blank cassette.

Video Still 5: 17:31, 24/05/1993

