

Karl Plank

WHEN THE WORD CAME

When the word came to evacuate, Phi was hunched over his desk like a question mark. If you had stood in the doorway, you might have wondered if he were breathing, only to conclude that this was the stillness of concentration. But you were not there, the door was closed, and he would not have noticed you in any case. This is simply to say, he was alone.

The desk, a used library table, held no clutter. A tidy stack of files in the corner, a well-worn book, a legal pad slanted to align with his right hand from which extended a fountain pen like an extra digit. Two framed photos watched as silent witnesses, as did another from the shelf behind him. The book rested flat without wobble, open to a six-line poem whose page filled with white space. On the yellow tablet, he had begun to write, but now was in pause, an undetermined interval. The files were of no apparent interest.

Had you been able to look over his shoulder you would have noticed three things: the words *if you see*, encircled on line four of the poem; on the tablet, the Latin sentence he had started but not finished, *ego te . . .*; and, in the margin of the yellow paper, a sketch of the intersection of two cubes, connected to create an optical illusion of shifting perspective, depth and protrusion—a doodle, you would have inferred and may or may not have been right in your judgment.

What you noticed would reveal more about you than our man at his desk, how fervently you grasp for details (and why is another story). You miss what matters. Some say, when the word came to evacuate, Phi Dees simply continued to do what he must, which was to do what he could. Others, that he saw no way out, the consuming details of no use at all.

--Published in *Helen: A Literary Magazine* 8 (2018)