



THE ASTRONOMER

STORY BY HANNAH BRISTOW

RESPONSE BY JACKSON M PHOENIX

A collaboration between Jackson M Phoenix, Barney White and you, **The Future We Choose** aims to craft a radical new collective vision for our shared future.

At this point of global disruption, we are at a place where a change of direction is essential, and we find ourselves in the handful of generations who have the opportunity to make this our legacy. It is clear we need to rethink our direction of travel as a species – but to change direction, we must have a new destination in mind.

The Future We Choose is a shared space for brave thinking, real dialogue, deep listening, and collective (re)visioning.

The Astronomer is one of several commissions from Greenbelt Festival and is produced by Acrojou.
It seeks to ask you:

Forgetting what you think is possible or likely, what could a radically better future for humanity and our planet look like?

Your response to this call will become part of the final artwork, premiering at Greenbelt Festival 2022: a collective (re)visioning installation.

What is it, the future you choose? To share your vision, leave us a voicemail on +44 (0)7455 363 164.

This book presents a drawn and written response by multidisciplinary artist Jackson M Phoenix to the story ‘The Astronomer’ by actor, performer and storyteller Hannah Bristow. It is one of a series of commissions by Greenbelt Festival as part of **The Future We Choose** project. Along with the other commissions, it presents a starting point from which we could collectively reimagine our shared future.

www.greenbelt.org.uk/the-future-we-choose

THE ASTRONOMER by Hannah Bristow

There was once an astronomer who lived their life alone
And spent their every moment staring out their window into the night sky
And sometimes, if you caught them in a quiet second
You could see that they were crying.
When they were asked why they watched and waited
They replied,
That they were looking for their star.

As time went by, they became desperate

They built themselves a telescope
And after the telescope they built an observatory
And night after night
They poured over every map and chart they could find
Mapping and noting and drawing and measuring and rejecting
every star they saw.
And there are more stars in the sky than we can count
and certainly more than we can see.
They looked at each and every one in turn
And it tormented them
Because they could never find their own.

Once they were done with each chart
They flung it aside
To pile up on the floor all around them.
Slowly the charts filled the floor of the observatory,
rose to the astronomer's knees
to their belly
the height of the desk
their chest
their neck
Until the charts filled the whole room
And the astronomer began to drown amongst them.
The lines of longitude and latitude, orbits and parsecs
curled to choke around the astronomer's neck.
And Latin names and numbers crawled across their eyes to blind them.

One night
When the astronomer's fingers shook from writing
And their eyes could see nothing but numbers and tears
They fell asleep
Their face resting on page 1678 of an astronomical atlas
The cold hard lines of the map pressing into their skin
And the stars seeping into their dreams.

Later
The dawn began to break
And their eyes gently flicked open
But they did not move
Because they could not
keep looking
anymore.

So instead of raising their eyes to the sky
Or to the telescope
Or the papers all around them
They left their head resting on the book before them
And gazed unseeingly back at their chest.

And as they unseeingly stared
They began to see what they had been missing all along.
A glowing
A glimmering
From somewhere beneath their skin
Inside their chest.
A tiny light.

Reaching out
Their fingers closed carefully around the shining object
And felt the edges of the light
Of Their Star
Which had been there
In their chest
all along

They pulled it out
And for a moment they held it in their palm
And they stared into the heart of it
And they saw everything:
The expanse of the night sky
Folded and twisted in and back on itself
In that tiny space
They saw every star and their own,
every planet, moon and asteroid
The earth and every person on it
They saw every birth and death and life
And they saw themselves
The back of their own head
Sitting as they were
Holding
And staring
into their star.

And after a short time
The star blinked
And flickered
And blinked out
And the astronomer stared
at their cupped, empty hands

And they looked up
And looked around at their accumulations

And then they wondered what to do next.

Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly.
Let it cut you more deep.
Let it ferment and season you
as few humans and even divine ingredients can.

Something missing in my heart tonight
has made my eyes so soft,
my voice so tender,
my need for God absolutely clear.

- Hafiz



When this opportunity presented itself - to create a series of pieces in any medium, I had the idea to illustrate one of Hannah's beautiful stories.

These drawings were, for me, an experiment in a new form. Having worked predominantly in live performance for my professional career, drawing has always, for me, been a private practice. When I draw, I do so in an attempt to capture the experience of that particular moment - the emotion, the spiritual experience, the sensation of Being. It is way to understand the journey, to better comprehend inner experience through externalising it. The images always focus on the human form: a conscious being experiencing whatever that particular moment presents. Whatever they look like physically, every figure, in every drawing, is me.



Usually, my drawings are fast - I start with little or no idea and draw very physically, in the same way I would improvise as a physical theatre performer: viscerally feeling and expressing an internal state through the body. The core intention is a search for Truth in the image, so they of a particular style - often strange, scrappy and technically 'bad'.

With this project, one of the challenges was to find an approach in which I kept the truth and 'life' of the drawings, and at the same time to work with more technique. I think I succeeded in some of the images, but not so in others.



Initially, my intention was to illustrate the entire narrative and present it as a book. However, after a few weeks struggling to find a way into the work, I realised something essential: I can only draw what I feel. I can't illustrate someone else's images or experience. On clarifying this, the project transformed.

As I understand it, The Astronomer is a story about love. The search for love and connection outside of oneself, and the truth that these things are, in fact, always within. In this, the Astronomer's journey spoke deeply to me. His story reflects my root struggle in this life, with dislocation and separation. The perception of aloneness.

I was working on this project directly after returning from a psychedelics retreat, a week which was the most beautiful and profound of my life, and in which I experienced the

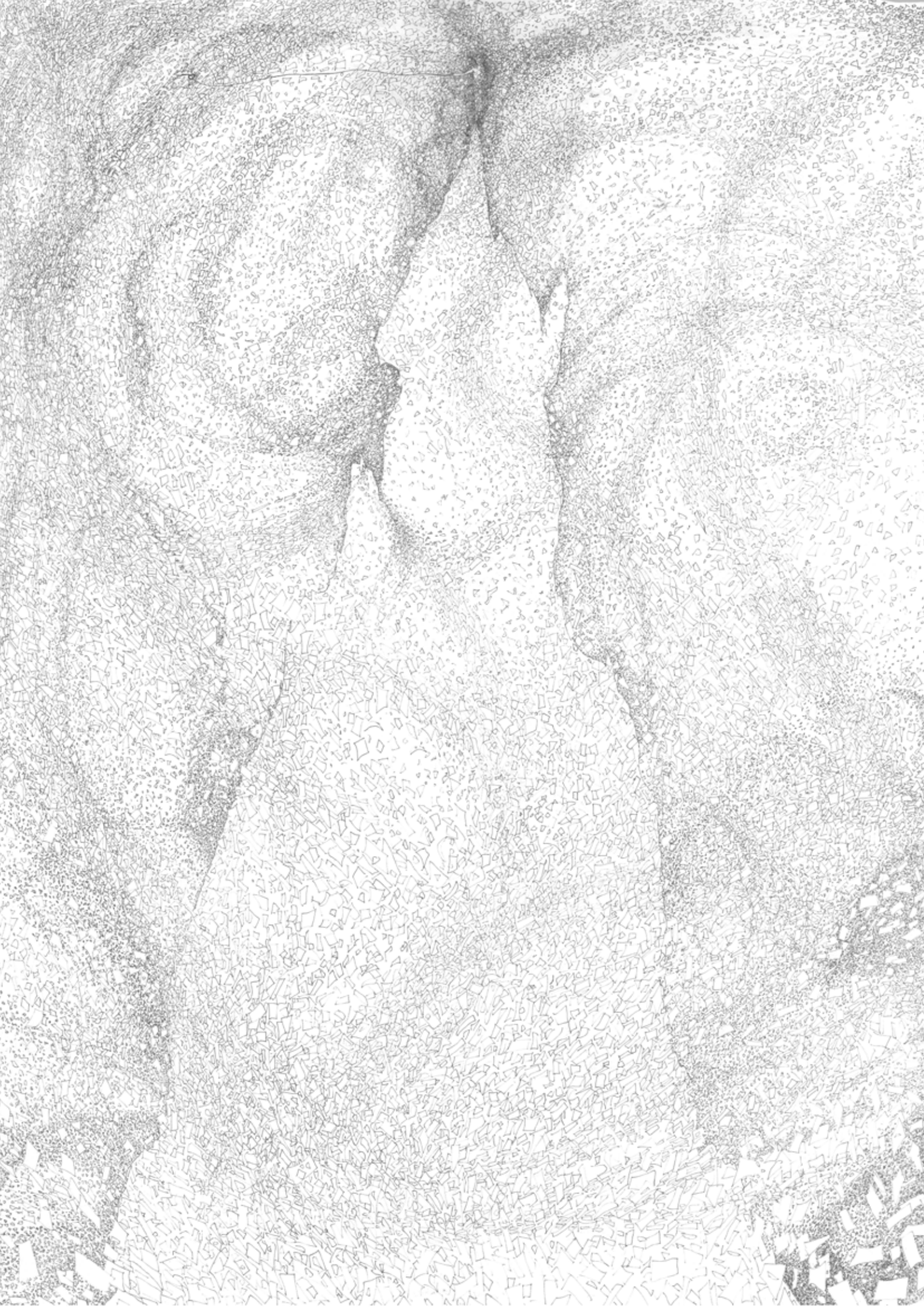


deepest connectedness I have ever felt. On returning home, the (perceived) loss of this, the dispersion of the group, and the ending of my romantic relationship, left me experiencing deep grief as I grappled with the return of feelings of disconnection and isolation, whilst at the same time being aware that the connectedness I had experienced so recently was still there, still inside me as my deeper truth.

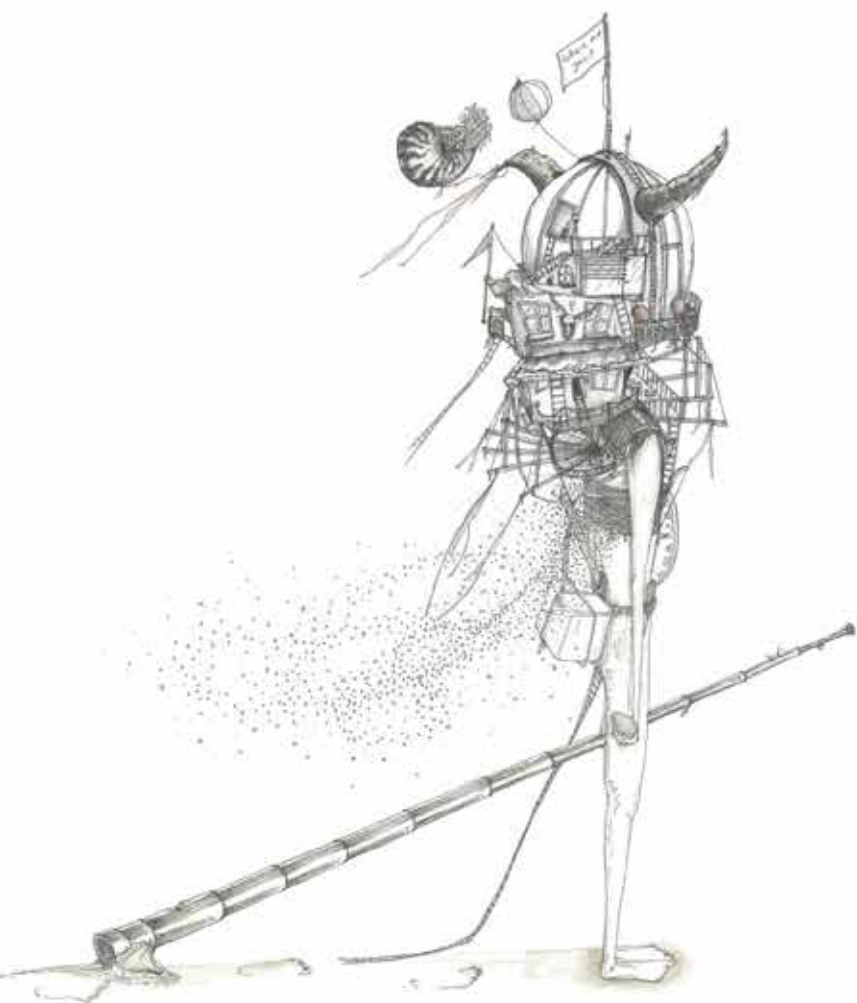
I was also, in the same period, thinking a lot about love. The difference between love that is based on someone particular, their them-ness and form, love that is finite, limited and loose-able, and Universal Love - the love I tasted on retreat. The love that is behind all loves, that is not limited to a particular person or thing, but that exists infinitely, beyond loss and beyond death. As I understand it, this love, all the love we



could ever need, is inside of each of us. And when we connect, with the natural world or any sentient being, the soul (re)opens, love meets love, and we are reminded that we are, in fact, just love. In the reflection of another, the soul recognises the other as itself, and its true nature as an intrinsic part of all that is. In Ram Dass' words *'Quiet your mind, open your heart. When you open the heart you just love that which you love, then just keep expanding it. You love a tree, you love a river, you love a leaf, you love a flower, you love a cat, you love a human. But go deeper and deeper into that love. Until you love that which is the source behind all of it. You don't worship the gate, you go into the inner temple. Everything in you that you don't need, you can let go of. You don't need loneliness. You couldn't possibly be alone.'*

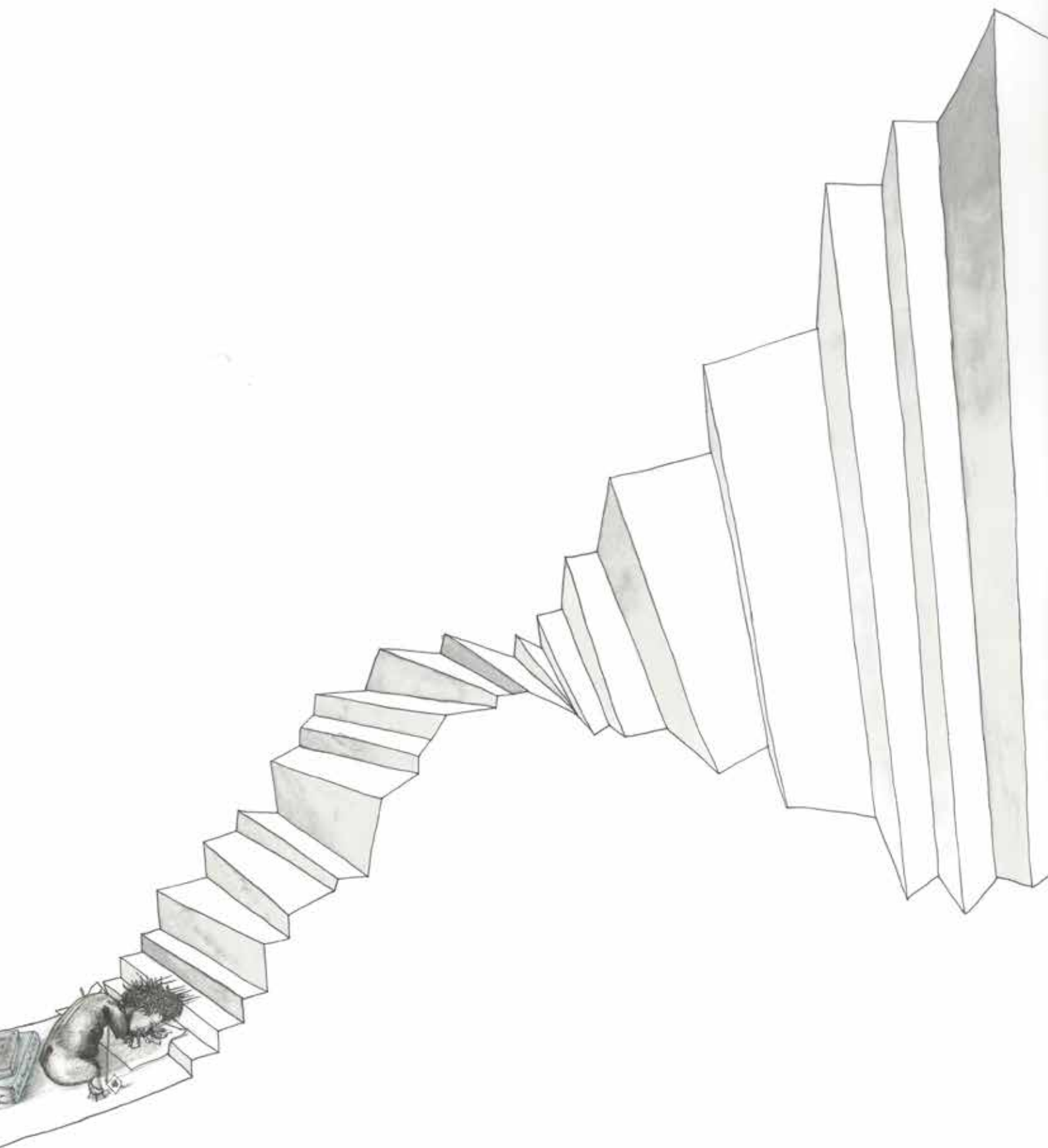


So, the drawing process became a ritual for me, through which to explore my spiralling between disconnection and connection, contraction and expansion, attached love and Universal Love. The images here reflect one stage, the first part of The Astronomer's journey: his aloneness and searching. As that was the part of my journey I was in at the time. They are attempt to understand my experiences around aloneness, and to translate the visceral, felt experience into image and symbol. The 'maps and charts' the astronomer obsesses with became, for me, the spiritual books and talks I have, at times, buried myself in - drowning in seeking through the mind.



In August, when I return to the project, prior to the final presentation at Greenbelt festival, I hope to create another piece or pieces, exploring the transformation the Astronomer experiences when he finds his star: his discovery of love, connection, and, in fact, the whole of existence, within himself. It will depend where I am on my personal journey at that time, however.

For me, the connection between this work and the project's overarching enquiry, the essential task of re-visioning our collective future, is in that whatever future we craft - whatever that landscape can or will look like - it begins first inside each of us. The understanding that everything that *is* starts with the state of our internal landscape, manifesting through perception, intention, and action. And the necessity of us each beginning here in order to build a



better human future. To begin with love, with constantly opening and reopening our hearts, with doing the work we need to do to heal what life has given us to heal. To each learn to know our deepest truth as not separate but intrinsically connected to all that is - all beings, the natural world, the entirety of this mysterious and magnificent universe. To build a new human future that begins first with connection, with open hearts, with compassion, and with love.

Jackson M Phoenix, July 2022

Hannah Bristow is an actor, performer and storyteller who lives in London and works internationally. This story is part of a collection of short stories for children and young people that she wrote during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The collection explores existential questions about finding cosmic and human connection, meaning and inner strength, especially in times of adversity and isolation. More about her and her work can be found at hannahbristow.com, where she can also be contacted.

Jackson M Phoenix is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice explores the sublimity and mystery of existence: what it is to be a bit of consciousness embodied in matter/ energy. He is fascinated by ways of perceiving, expanding and understanding 'reality', as well as the potential impact of higher consciousness and healing on the future of the human journey.

His practice consist of dual artistic and spiritual pathways. As Artistic Director at Acrojou (visual theatre, www.acrojou.com) for 16 years, he co-created multiple productions that have toured extensively across 25 countries, with programming/ commissioning partners including The National Theatre London, The V&A, The Royal Opera House, and The National Kaohsiung Centre for the Arts (Taiwan). www.jacksonmphoenix.com

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Created by Jackson M. Phoenix and Barney White
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