

SILENCE

by Vladimir Zelevinsky

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Characters:

GIORDANO BRUNO, astronomer

ROBERT BELLARMINE, inquisitor

*Year 1600 anno domini; the dungeon at Castel Sant' Angelo in Rome.
Iron bars cross the window. Pieces of astronomical equipment –
telescope, star chart, astrolabe – on the floor.*

BRUNO

So, then, it's fire?

Pause.

BELLARMINE

Fire.

Pause.

BRUNO

How does it feel?

BELLARMINE

Almost laughs at the incongruity of the question.

I wouldn't know.

Pause.

BRUNO

When?

BELLARMINE

February 17th.

BRUNO

A cold winter day.

BELLARMINE

Not for you.

Pause.

BRUNO

Anything else I should know?

BELLARMINE

Haven't you ever been at Campo di Fiore on the execution day?

BRUNO

No!

BELLARMINE

Nothing you'd be surprised at. You will be naked.

BRUNO

Why naked?

BELLARMINE

There's too much smoke when the clothing burns. The public complains it's hard to see.

Pause.

BRUNO

But it spins! It's not in the center! The stars are not attached to a transparent sphere!

BELLARMINE

You persist?

BRUNO

Grabs a telescope.

You can see for yourself!

BELLARMINE

I don't need to.

BRUNO

Look at the movement of the minor planets!

BELLARMINE

Are you trying to convince me?

Pause.

BRUNO

I don't have anyone else to convince.

BELLARMINE

You have so very little time left. Don't waste it.

BRUNO

But it is true.

BELLARMINE

No, it isn't! We are the ones who decide what is true and what isn't!

Pause.

BRUNO

Then what's the use of anything?

BELLARMINE

You still have a choice. You can recant.

Pause.

BRUNO

Will you not burn me then?

BELLARMINE

We will. But there will be a bag of gunpowder placed around your neck. You will die quickly.

BRUNO

Why do you offer this?

BELLARMINE

Mercy.

Pause.

BRUNO

Have you noticed that people who declare what is true and what isn't are usually the first ones to lie?

Pause.

What you don't want is for me to stand there, in Campo di Fiore, and declare that the world does not revolve around you.

BELLARMINE

This doesn't make our offer any less valid.

Pause.

BRUNO

I wasted so much time. I should have told the people. There's a woman who delivers milk. I saw her every day. She can't read – but I could have told her about the Earth, and the Sun, and –

BELLARMINE

She wouldn't have listened. Why would a milk woman listen to a man of science talking about a celestial sphere?

BRUNO

It is not a sphere! The stars belong to an infinite array of suns like our own, each circled by astounding worlds, all inhabited by intelligent beings like ourselves!

BELLARMINE

Another reason why you will be naked is that they like to watch the skin blister and break open.

BRUNO

Oh, kind Lord Almighty, maybe more intelligent than ourselves.

BELLARMINE

Don't use His name in vain.

BRUNO

I asked for more intelligence. I hope this wasn't in vain.

Pause.

BRUNO (CONT.)

You are right. They wouldn't have listened. Nobody read it, either – other than you. And I was so happy when I published. De l'Infinito, Universo e Mondi! New paper, uncut pages, and the smell of black ink, and my name on the title page. A reminder that I exist.

BELLARMINE

Words.

BRUNO

Yes, words.

Pause.

When Aesop was a slave and his master bade him bring the best cut of meat from the market, Aesop brought tongue – and explained this by saying that tongue lets people express their love, read poetry, exchange learned discourse. Then the master, intrigued, bade him bring the worst cut of meat from the market, and again Aesop brought tongue, saying it was the tool of slander, insults, and lies.

BELLARMINE

What did the master do?

BRUNO

He ordered Aesop to be thrown from the cliff for thinking too much.

BELLARMINE nods in approval.

I don't think I'm going to recant, my dear arbiter of truth. I'd rather see the crowd in the square, and tell them what revolves around what. And then – oh, then they will listen. It is hard to ignore the man on fire. And then, I guess, at Campo di Fiore will grow one more flower. Big, orange and yellow. Not the worst way out, if one turns into a flower.

BELLARMINE moves the astronomical equipment with his foot.

Shall I tell you how to use these?

BELLARMINE

No. You have the tools of your trade, I have mine. In this case, the tool is a two-inch nail with which we'll nail your tongue to your lower jaw. The stake is not to be used as a pulpit.

Pause.

BRUNO

Then I have nothing left.

BELLARMINE

You have a choice. The nail or the gunpowder.

Pause.

BRUNO

Maybe you can just let me go.

BELLARMINE

We can not! If we would, you will go around spreading your heresy! The order of things will be lost, clarity will give way to confusion, answers will be swamped by new questions, and Earth itself will wobble, and shake, and fall off its plinth in the center of the universe! You mock when you call us the arbiters of truth, but we are the only force that stands between certainty and doubt! If we fail, chaos will prevail. So you must burn.

Pause.

BRUNO

Perhaps you, my judge, pronounce this sentence against me with greater fear than I receive it. It seems it was answered, my prayer for intelligence – maybe the only cause worth praying for. You are afraid of me, my lord, with all your dungeons and your fires. And it means that I am right and that you admit it. So – the nail, my dear confessor, the nail! And let the Earth roll down from its marble pedestal and spin through the Universe, one of an infinite number of its cosmic brethren! Because I know it spins. And I have something louder than words.

BELLARMINE

And that would be?

BRUNO is silent.

If you swallowed your tongue, we have many ways to help you get it back.

BRUNO stays silent.

A red-hot poker, properly applied, performs wonders.

A slight smile appears on BRUNO's face.

Why are you smiling?

Silence.

You have no idea how much power we wield and what we can do to you.

Silence.

Say something!

Silence.

You are a smart man; there's no need to behave like a petulant child.

Silence.

Talk to me, Bruno!

Silence.

Fine, then! Go and burn! You little smirking loony! Go!

BRUNO exits. BELLARMINE stands still for a while. Then he kicks at the broken tools. Picking up the telescope, he stares at it. Looks around. Then he walks to the window, puts the telescope to his eye, and looks up.