

# Falling Back to Earth

written by Derek Sapienza | September 22, 2014



*Saturn* by Simon Jacobs  
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**“How do you like your heroes? Over-easy or sunny-side up?”**

– Marlon Brando, *Last Tango in Paris*, 1972

**“Here I am, not quite dying / My body left to rot in a hollow tree”**

– David Bowie, “The Next Day,” 2013

Bernardo Bertolucci’s 1972 film *Last Tango In Paris* opens with images of Francis Bacon’s *Double Portrait of Lucian Freud and Frank Auerbach* and *Study for a Portrait*. Bacon’s color palette and lighting directly informed the film’s bleak sets and cinematography. Marlon Brando is a middle-aged expatriate coming to grips with aging, culture, and sexuality through an increasingly violent affair, finally coming apart while trying desperately to remain connected to other people. After Bertolucci’s manipulative and exacting direction, the unflappable Brando retired from taking any demanding role, saying the film had hit too close to home and had emotionally destroyed him.

Bacon’s work also dominates the fictional David Bowie in Simon Jacobs’s *Saturn*. In a collection of brief vignettes supposing Bowie’s life between his massive heart attack in 2004 and the release of 2013’s *The Next Day* album, Jacob’s Bowie is an existentialist traveler, more specter than man. Like Brando after *Last Tango*, he is rattled and without identity, a lost soul trying desperately to connect to other humans. In many ways he is more the alien Thomas Jerome Newton (his character in Nicholas Roeg’s 1976 film *The Man Who Fell To Earth*) than the man born David Jones.

This Bowie is not Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, or the Thin White Duke, and that's the problem. Surrounded by art, family, and the trappings of wealth and an enormously successful career, he is an artist in self-exile, isolated and directionless, haunted by a past littered with dozens of identities. What's worse, he's also a middle-aged man coming to grips with surviving a heart attack and entering old age. He quotes lines from his songs, watches his old films, and builds a house identical to one he owned years ago. The art he owns turns into portraits of himself, and as he unravels, he becomes the tortured art that obsesses him: Hieronymus Bosch, Bacon, and finally, gruesomely, Francisco Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*.



Jacobs is clearly a Bowie fan. And *Saturn* is written with a great deal of sympathy and care for the man that shapes but never intrudes on the stories. Awash in details culled from Bowie's entire oeuvre, Jacobs's writing perfectly suits the isolated and weird Bowie, and as the artifacts of a fifty-year career litter his mind, the terse/dense prose carefully and plausibly adds static to the slowly increasing claustrophobia that undoes him. We are inside the great man's head, seeing and feeling the insurmountable pull from reality that is much more terrifying than all outward appearances would let on. At times, Jacobs's prose can be precious and sentimental, but it is never distracting or out of Bowie's character. Even as he slides from lonely to tortured to grotesque, Bowie is kept as confoundingly human as such a creature could ever be.

The surprise release of 2013's *The Next Day* was astonishing not only because it was as fine a rock record any 66-year-old artist could produce, but because one of the world's most recognizable entertainers could pull off such a feat. In absentia, David Bowie still exudes a tremendous gravitational pull. He is now in the rarefied realm of "Legend" that very few artists could hope to achieve—almost universally beloved and beyond criticism. Bowie is now above negative reviews, cries of artistic frivolity, and even (thank god) Morrissey's charges of "cultural vampirism." But his self-imposed exile has created a void, and out of this Simon Jacobs creates a David Bowie that falls back to earth with a fantastic speed that is both very human and very monstrous. *Saturn* is a smart, tortured, and compelling "what if." With Bowie, that's the best we have to go on.

# SATURN

simon jacobs

