

DEAD GENERATION
AND OTHERS

Stories by Ian Donnell Arbuckle

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These are works of fiction. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or situations is coincidental.

<http://www.saltboy.com>

This collection is dedicated to
my brothers Joel and Daniel.
Without their support and imaginations,
I would be a lesser writer.

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The stories collected in this volume are a mix of new material and previously-published work. The copyright page has the full details. These stories were written in the period spanning 2003 to 2006, with a variety of implements (mostly electronic in nature) and in a variety of locales (mostly in Washington State.) They have received a number of reactions, including positive and negative.

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That's all.

THAT OLD SILK HAT

In old Nippon, in the city of Edo, there was a lonely *daimyo*. He was a minor lord, arbitrator and administrator for a modest section of the city, wherein lived simple artisans and rough tradesmen. His wooden house was only slightly larger than those of his subjects, but it felt to him like a palace, because of how empty it was. He lived there by himself, with only a single servant to aide him besides. In the mornings, as he sat facing the spectacle of the slopes of the great mountain, he could hear the footsteps of his servant echoing out and back against the walls. There was no laughter, no rustle of silk clothing or clinking of tea service to interrupt the hollow noise. The *daimyo* was lonely, and felt as if the echoes would last forever, and be his only legacy.

He was not a relative of the shogun, but his rank afforded him the occasional visit to the palace. On

each of these visits, the *daimyo* lusted for the shogun's wives and consorts, not just for their bodies, but also for their grace, the shushing of their slippers on lacquer, the pleasure of their dance. It would have been a sentence of shame to have said anything, so the *daimyo* pretended to look away from the women, involved himself in minor business whenever they performed for the shogun.

One winter, upon waking in a cold bed, the *daimyo* felt his loneliness grow to its sharpest, bitterest point, like a sliver that had worked its way to the surface of the skin and then must be plucked out. He fell into a depression, convinced he lacked the tools for the necessary surgery. At a gathering of other minor *daimyo*, he let slip his jealousy of the emperor and, though his peers made no direct condemnation, he knew, as his servant carried him home, that he would not survive as *daimyo* for another season, that his time was over.

His depression deepened. Though his professional life had brought him shame, his focus was more than ever on his lack of companionship. His servant, fearful of being tossed to the streets, set out to remedy his master's problem. He spoke to magicians, who told him there was nothing they could do. He spoke to spirits, who said that love of any kind is impossible to force a spirit into. He spoke with the creatures of the forest, the *tanuki*, who are practical and wise and the masters of transformation. They told him that the spirit need not be bent to love, but that a vessel for love might be created. They were pleased to have bested the magicians of the servant's own race. They instructed him to travel to the slopes of the great mountain, there to fetch a cartful of ice, and then to find *kimura-gumo*, the spinning spiders, and to capture a score of them in mid-dance. The servant would then need to sculpt the ice into the form of a human, and

to harvest the silk of the *kimura-gumo* to create a garment. If this garment were to be laid on the sculpture, the sculpture would come to life, with the purity of new snow and the dance of the spiders.

The servant thanked the *tanuki* and set out to collect the ingredients. First he hunted the *kimura-gumo*, and from their silk he fashioned a black kimono. Then he traveled to the slopes of the great mountain and fetched a cartload of new snow and ice. These he brought to his master, and explained what the *tanuki* had told him.

The *daimyo* seized upon the opportunity, but he thought to himself: I am already shamed; I could not bear to risk further scorn by letting it be known that I fashioned a companion for myself. He decided that, instead of using the pure snow to form his consort, he would mix the melted water with dirt from his own garden, so that the creature would be tied to the land, unable to set foot beyond the walls of his house and risk embarrassing him.

With his plan thus crystallized, the *daimyo* set to crafting his companion. He had his servant do the work, but he watched carefully the shaping of the arms, the legs, the neck, the face, and made suggestions where necessary. There were rumors in the air of the shogun forcing the *daimyo* to relinquish his post when the sculpture was finally finished.

With trembling hands, the *daimyo* draped the kimono around the clay body. Immediately, a light shone from within the creature's head, and its delicate mouth cracked wide. A thin laugh pealed through the room and the creature seized the *daimyo* by the arms. Together they circled the room in a clumsy peasant's dance. The creature stamped heavily on the wooden floors, shaking the walls and stumbling. It wasn't sure on its feet, but it continued to laugh and, before long, began to sing.

The *daimyo* was concerned. This creature of awkward motion possessed nothing of the graceful beauty of the shogun's wives. As he was spun through the air, a clarity came upon him, and he realized that the creature was no better than an apprentice effort, suitable for nothing but scrap and slip. He ordered the creature to stop, but it would not. It gave a joyous shout and stumbled out of the room, onto the house's small balcony. The *daimyo* heard a sound like the tapping of chopsticks and looked down. The creature's legs were forming web-thin cracks where the clay had dried improperly.

All at once, a peal of answering laughter came from below. The peasants had gathered in the street to watch the *daimyo* be carried about by his foolish creation. Again, the *daimyo* ordered the creature to stop, but it gave no indication of having heard him. The *daimyo* tried to struggle out of the creature's grip, but could not. As they spun near the railing, the *daimyo* kicked out with both feet, unbalancing the creature and himself. The creature swept its laughter into one long, thin wail and overbalanced, falling to the street and taking the *daimyo* with it. As they hit the packed dirt, they upset a charcoal brazier that stood in front of the *daimyo*'s house. The brazier tipped against the door, and the lacquered wood exploded into flame.

The creature had been utterly destroyed by the fall, its pieces scattered for yards around. The *daimyo* struggled to his feet. With the heat of the fire on his backside, he stared at the half-circle of peasants that were staring on. Not one among them could hold back a smile, though several had darted away to fetch buckets of water.

Without a word, the *daimyo* turned on his heel and entered his burning home.

The fire spread quickly, from wooden house to wooden house, and soon the whole street was ablaze,

the paths choked with peasants with their carts of possessions and invalid family. The *daimyo's* servant had collected such a cart as soon as he saw the fire, and then waited in front of the door to his master's house. When it became apparent his master was not coming, the servant did as selfish men are wont to do: he gave his past a single glance over the shoulder and pressed forward. He stooped once to the ground to retrieve the kimono, now torn and stuck with clay dust.



In 1863, a Basque man came to Tokyo, speaking very little of the language. The children of the street marked him and followed him, giggling to themselves as he entered one boarding house after another, unable to make the simple request for a room. When the day had nearly waned, the Basque found an establishment which was run by a polyglot. As he stood in the receiving hall, waiting for the innkeeper to light the fire in his room, the bravest of the children snuck up behind him and picked his pocket, relieving him of a slightly-tarnished silver watch. The Basque turned, having felt the lift, and tried to snatch at the child, but the child danced back and ran for the door.

Just as the child reached the threshold, the innkeeper slipped out of the shadows and caught him around the neck. The child struggled, but the innkeeper's grip was firm. "Do you have children?" he asked the Basque in Spanish.

"No," replied the Basque.

"They are surely the purest of joys." With that, the innkeeper yanked the child off his feet and retrieved the Basque's watch. Singing a string of high-pitched syllables, the child regained his balance and

ducked away from the innkeeper, sketched a mock bow, and darted out the door.

“The police will deal with him?” the Basque wondered aloud.

The innkeeper shook his head and handed the watch back to its owner. “It is not a very good watch,” he said.

“There is certain sentimental value,” said the Basque.

The Basque found good company in the innkeeper, and that night they sat together in the common room, drinking *sake* talking. The Basque was interested in stories of local history, and the innkeeper seemed to have a wealth of such stories that had been building pressure on his tongue as water presses on a dam. Of all the stories, there was one that stole all of the Basque's attention, so that after hearing of it, he quite missed the rest of what the innkeeper had to say.

“Tell me again about the mad *daimyo* and his black kimono,” said the Basque.

The innkeeper smiled. “Yes, that is one of my favorites, as well.” Then he stood and beckoned. “Come. I have something you would like to see.” The Basque followed the innkeeper back through the kitchen to a basement cellar. The innkeeper fetched a kerosene lamp and led the Basque down. The cellar smelled of mildew and tubers; it was cold enough that the Basque could see the mist of his breath. The earthen walls were lined with sacks of vegetables, pots of honey, and casks of fruits. “Look here,” said the innkeeper, dragging a small wooden chest out from the shadows. It was fastened shut with bamboo pegs, which the innkeeper knocked loose with the sole of his shoe. “Try not to breathe,” he said, and lifted the lid.

The stench of rotten sulfur billowed out into the room. The Basque coughed and gagged while the

innkeeper, his face passive and smiling, leaned into the chest and withdrew a sheet of linen, covered in the sulfur dust. "The moths do not eat through the sulfur," he explained. He set the linen on the ground and reached into the chest again. This time, he came out holding a thin garment of black silk, barely a whisper of a shadow. "My honored ancestor once served the mad *daimyo*," he said. "And we, his children, have kept this as a mark of our modest origin."

The Basque let his hand drop away from his nose and gaped. "Does it work?" he stammered.

The innkeeper shook it out. Large triangles of fabric hung loose from the body, like flaps of dead skin, but yards of whole cloth remained undamaged. "I have never tried to use it," he said. "I have no need for companionship, and lack the skills to craft a suitable figure, besides. It is an heirloom, nothing more."

The Basque took a step forward. "I will buy it from you," he said. There was a catch in his voice, a force that suggested he could not have made the offer any quicker, or said the words more hopefully.

The innkeeper smiled faintly and turned what was left of the kimono into the light, to better appraise it. "What message do you take from the story of the mad *daimyo*?" he asked.

"I don't know," said the Basque. He hadn't let his eyes wander from the silk.

"I believe that the story is a warning against selfishness, and against mistaking such an impulse for love. The *daimyo* was not destroyed by the creation of the surrogate lover. He had aimed himself toward doom long before that, when he allowed that his jealousy of the *shogun's* wives might be deflected to another vessel rather than purged from his thoughts. My ancestor's role in the story was as catalyst, as it is with we who serve unselfishly." The innkeeper

glanced over to see if the Basque had caught the slight witticism, but received no response in word or gesture. "It would be most expensive," the innkeeper concluded. "I could not part with it for anything less than a minor fortune, you understand."

"I have little of value," said the Basque, now breaking his stare and shifting his gaze to his feet. "My home was destroyed by rioters, and my possessions were taken by looters. The money I had in the *banca* I'm sure would not begin to pay for such a prize."

"Your watch, then," said the innkeeper.

"It is but silver," he said. "A wedding gift from my wife."

"She would be upset to learn you had traded it for a bundle of tatters, would she?" asked the innkeeper.

The Basque held the watch in the palm of his hand, spidery shadows from his fingers masking the reflections from the lantern. "No," he said. "She is dead." The innkeeper stood in respectful silence as a decision worked its way to the fore of the other man's tongue. "I shall make the trade," said the Basque, extending the hand that held the watch.

The innkeeper first pressed the fabric into the Basque's hand, then retrieved the watch. There was an inscription on the back in flowery Spanish, which, out of respect, the innkeeper did not try to read. The Basque rubbed the silk between his fingers, his attention absorbed in consideration of its strength, color, and texture. "Thank you," he said.

The innkeeper shrugged it off and mounted the stairs. "What value has a story?" he asked. "None, if the audience gives it none."

The Basque left Tokyo the following day, riding for Kyoto, whence he could hire passage back to Spain. Throughout the long journey, he kept the silk close at hand. When he had the privacy, he engaged in the sewing necessary to fashion a proper garment

from the remainder. Having little skill and only an old fishing hook as a needle, his work was necessarily crude, but functional. When his feet hit the familiar dust of the paths that surrounded his home, he had a woman's shawl in black silk tucked under his arm.

The village was no longer his, though he had grown up there. Rioters had swept through like a plague of locusts. The Basque was still unsure of the motivation — whether it was religious, political, or something less defensible — but he had experienced the effect first-hand. In the night, the rioters had come upon his modest house while he worked late at his job assisting the village lawyer. Perhaps as premonition, the Basque had been discomfited throughout the whole day and requested at last that he might be able to return home to take a tonic and calm his mind. He had arrived at his house as the last of the rioters whooped and crowed over the flames they had built to consume it. With a thought for his wife, the Basque had leapt toward the flames, giving the rioters a wide birth. As he ducked into the house, he glanced over his shoulder and recognized the face of one of the rioters. It was his son, a young man who had never known his father. In that instant, with the flames searing his left side and a wash of shame boiling his right, the Basque felt as if he had lost everything.

He had gone straight to the bedroom he shared with his wife, covering his nose and mouth with his sleeve. He found her unconscious in bed. He carried her out the back door, unwilling to face the young men again. He tried in vain to awaken his wife as the house and all his possessions burned behind him. All were hot coals and ash by the time he finally gave up and wept over her body. They had grown distant in the recent months, because of her desire for a child, and his unwillingness to give her one. As he thought about all the things he ought to have said to her, the

air went cold and the last of the fire was smothered in a shroud of light rain.

That had been nearly a year previous; the Basque had spent the intervening time wandering the world in search of distraction, an explorer of low means.

He didn't know who now ruled in the village, so he waited until nightfall and then crept with his package to the church yard. He found his wife's marker, already decaying as though it were made of soapstone. Working with no light but for the half moon, the Basque dug with sticks and hands until he heard them strike pine. He had prepared a paste of sulfur, which he applied under his nose before opening the coffin.

His wife's body was dark, like wet clay. Her burial shroud had been eaten back from her body, exposing crossed, desiccated arms and a nakedness that held no secrets. The Basque lifted her gently, as though she were a cake about the crumble, and set her against her gravestone.

He knew that there was a disappointment lurking just under his skin, and that it was seconds away from bursting through. He bent down to his wife's body and said: "You must be cold." Then he wrapped the black silk shawl around her shoulders.

Immediately, her body began to shake as though taken by a heavy fever. The Basque took her shoulders and stared into the pits of her eyes. "My love," he said. "There is something I should have told you years ago."

A dry hiss came from deep within her lungs and the smell of her rotten air nearly overwhelmed him, even through the sulfur. She struggled against his hands, shaking this way and that, and he realized that she was trying to stand.

"No, listen," he said. "I have wandered far in search of the means to forget my contributions to the

failure between us, but I have not been able to do so. I wasn't meant to forget, so let me speak." Her hips bucked under him and the hiss became a stuttering laugh which sounded, by necessity, cruel. The Basque tried to continue. "Years ago, when we were first married, I did not love you. You were cold and distant, a young girl from her father's house and not the wife of mine. I found comfort in another woman, the wife of a merchant. I got her with child, though we were careful to avoid the possibility. For both our sakes, we never saw each other again, though I did see her from time to time around the market, walking with her son.

"I watched the son. He grew up mean and naughty, chasing girls, drowning frogs, and seeming to resist all urges to grow out of the mood. My lover, she was not a rough person, nor was her husband. I had thought that neither was I, but seeing my son, the child of my brutish seed, forced me to look inward to my soul.

"If my offspring could overcome the fairer nature of its mother and instead turn to the animalistic, a side I did not even know I had, then there was no hope between you and me of having children, for I could not bear to chain you to such an unfulfilling life. As we grew closer together, you and I, our balance shifted. I became colder and more distant, because I could not provide you with that which you most wanted."

The dead body could not take the waiting any longer. The Basque finally let it go, and it struggled to its feet, unbalanced as a newborn fawn. It began a slow twirl, and the dry wheezes that must have been laughter began again in earnest. The Basque felt tears prick the corners of his eyes and cold trails slicked his cheeks.

Suddenly, a pair of rotten hands grabbed him by arms and, though they had no strength, helped him to

his feet. His dead wife spun him round and round, her head thrown back, bones clacking, laughing like a snake. The wind dried the Basque's tears and stung his eyes and, when he could not bear the dreadful dance any longer, he reached up to the body's neck and cast away the shawl.

At once, the body went inert. Its momentum carried it over the edge of the exhumed grave and back into the coffin, where its joints popped and broke. The Basque, on hands and knees, peered down into the dark, but from six feet he could not make out her ruined face, and his memory refused to supply one for him. He leaned against the tombstone and wept because he had nothing left of his wife.



The Mckinleys had emigrated from a coal-mining village in Scotland just south of Glasgow, and ended up in almost the same coal-mining village in Colorado. The miners were mostly Scottish immigrants, the schoolmarm taught Gaelic alongside arithmetic, and even the working hours were the same.

In 1945, Mrs Mckinley had a daughter while her husband was underground. She named the child Asha, which means "hope." Asha grew up going to the one-room schoolhouse three days of the week, and helping her mother with housework on the other four, except during the heavy Colorado winters, during which the school was closed and all the children spent hours trying to escape their chores to go dig tunnels in the snow with their friends.

One summer, when Asha was twelve, Mr Mckinley was killed in a mining accident, and the two women were forced to make ends meet by serving as tailors for the whole village. Asha stopped going to school so she could keep up with the stitching that

had drifted on their kitchen table. She attracted a new nickname: Asha Shutup, because she always had too much work to come outside and play.

The Christmas after Mr Mckinley's accident, Mrs Mckinley's brother came to visit. He had done well for himself in the coal prospecting business, and had spent the better part of the year touring Europe. When he arrived at their doorstep, he was wearing a black pea-coat so thick he seemed to be a globe; his boots were buckled with silver and brass, and a black top-hat perched like a snide joke on his head. Asha had never seen him before, so she was cautiously polite, but after only a few moments of his booming voice and welcome, warm breath, she was giggling like mad at his jokes and even returning a few of her own.

Mrs Mckinley was not so pleased, and referred to her brother as "His Highness" all throughout the evening, complaining that they wouldn't get any work done that night. Asha was grateful for the respite, and His Highness could tell. He suggested that the women needn't do any more work that night, that he would gladly treat them to a Christmas turkey, with as many trimmings as could be mustered in the isolated village. Mrs Mckinley reluctantly agreed. The dinner was magnificent; the oven labored for so long that the whole house took on a rosy glow. After dinner, His Highness told stories of his adventures in restored Berlin, in Moscow, in Madrid while Asha listened in rapt attention, her eyes steady on her uncle, her imagination far away and getting further by the second.

Asha slept fitfully that night. Two things kept waking her up: the spark of wanderlust that His Highness had instilled, and the rustling of her mother as she fussed with the work that had been ignored. In the morning, it was clear to Asha that her mother hadn't slept a wink. She was about to apologize when

His Highness announced himself with a tremendous yawn and a morning wink for his niece.

"There's coffee on the stove," said Asha's mother.

"You needn't have done that, sister," said His Highness. "I brought a packet of the most exquisite French roast."

"We got what we got," said Asha's mother.

"Well, at least let me give you some," said His Highness. "It can't be easy to get coffee way up here."

"Don't mind it," said Asha's mother. "We do all right."

His Highness gave Asha an exaggerated shrug and collapsed at the table. "What is on the agenda for this fine day, my dears?" he asked. "Shall we go for a stroll on the green? How about an auction. Are there any going on today?"

Asha's mother gave no answer but a snort that lacked the force of humor. "I'd like to go to school," said Asha.

"Absolutely not," said her mother. "Do you see how much we have to do today?"

Asha knew better than to answer the rhetorical, so she sat back in her chair. His Highness broke the silence. "Do you mean to imply that this dull effort has been preventing my niece from attending to her schooling?"

"Things are rough," said Asha's mother, winding a bobbin.

"Outrageous!" said His Highness. "Things could never be so rough as to distract a young mind from education. They mustn't be. If it weren't for simple knowledge, we would be no better than the peasants of the Dark Ages, picking at burlap with bone needles and tearing coal from the mountain with forks of wood."

"Please, mother," Asha interjected.

The whir and click of the sewing machine stood as an answer. Asha sighed and leaned forward to retrieve her thimble, but His Highness slapped his hand over it before she could. He stood and beckoned her to her feet with a wag of his eyebrows. "We are going out," he announced.

Asha's mother sighed and bent tighter over her sewing. "This house is not yours to govern, brother," she said.

"Nor is this life yours, dear sister." His Highness fetched Asha her coat and, as she fumbled into her mittens, he plopped his old silk hat on her head and adjusted its angle. He stepped back and appraised her with a finger aside his nose. "It doesn't match your coat," he decreed. Despite herself, Asha giggled.

Her mother glanced up once more to say: "You look ridiculous."

"And you're nearsighted," said His Highness. "I will bring her home straight after the lesson," he added.

"I expect so."

The temperature was kissing right up to freezing, so the snow was wet and sticky: perfect for snowballs. His Highness delighted in their creation almost as much as he did in their qualities as weapons. He coaxed Asha into playing one-ups with him, where the victor gets to name the next target. Neither of them could hit the steeple.

His Highness sat in the back of the classroom as Asha sat in her lessons. The bit of chalk and lap-slate felt good in her hands again, and the teacher was kind enough to ignore, just this once, the whispered conversations that the girls passed around.

After lessons were over, His Highness walked Asha home. "I would rather stay with my friends," said Asha. Behind them, in the town's single street, the boys had taken note of the snow's exceptional

qualities, as well, and had declared a war on the fairer sex. Asha felt as though she were caught between abandonments: on the one side were her friends and gender, on the other her work and mother. In the space between, she felt cold, and realized she would much rather flee and help bring ruin to the boys than huddle near the stove, darning other people's socks. She said as much to His Highness.

"Have we encroached enough upon your mother's good graces, do you think?" he asked. Asha didn't answer. She trudged forward with guilt taking over as motivation. "I'll tell you what," said His Highness. "I'll stand lookout, if you will promise to peg that brat who was sniffing all through lessons."

Asha grinned and beat her arms as if she were a bird cut loose from a trap. She made to remove the top hat, but His Highness stopped her. "It's an old, and seen worse than a bit of wet weather, if you believe the stories. Do you like it?"

"Very much so, uncle," said Asha, fluttering her eyelashes just to test out the effect. It made His Highness smile.

"Picked it up in the south of France," he said. "Some curiosity shop, where the owner babbled on about *vivre*, life. Consider it a gift for my darling niece."

"Oh, thank you!" said Asha, throwing her arms around his thick frame. Then, she slid headlong down the path to the main street, where she caught one of the boys in the ear with a handful of slush. His Highness leaned up against the side of the church, every so often aiming a snowball at the steeple.

The air filled with childish screams and giggles. The Carver boys hunted Asha through the thin alleys with double-handfuls of snow. They got her separated from the other girls and cornered her by the grocer's. She kicked at them and screamed for help, but was cut off mid-laugh by the sound of her own name being

hollered by her mother. She straightened up and turned in the direction of their house. Her mother was standing by the church, arms folded, trying to divide her icy stare between her brother and her daughter. His Highness seemed relaxed, his hands in his pockets, but Asha felt her spine tense up. Just then, the Carver boys yanked open the back of her coat, dumped their snow down, and ran away crowing like soldiers. The action had focused her mother's gaze, but standing there in a growing puddle, Asha felt unreachable, as if the game had widened now to include both His Highness and her mother, and there was no way His Highness was on the boys' team.

"I'm already cold!" Asha yelled at her mother, then ducked behind a building to plan a counter strike on the Carver boys.

From time to time, as the games wore on, Asha glanced up toward the church. The first time, she saw her mother and His Highness engaged in an animated argument, their arms stabbing at God, the ground, the mountains. The second time, they were turned away from each other, and each had their arms folded tightly. The third time, both had disappeared; and the last time, His Highness had reappeared, holding his suitcase in one hand.

"Are you leaving, uncle?" Asha called out as he drew nearer. He didn't answer until he was close enough to put a warm hand on her shoulder.

"I'm afraid so, my dear. Consider this yet another brief stop on my whirlwind passage across the globe. Why, I barely stayed this long in London, and there are loads more pretty girls, there, to coax me to stay."

"Mother is making you leave," said Asha.

His Highness sighed and sank one knee into the snow, the better to catch his niece's eye. "Your mother wears a lot of pride on her back. What pride does, my dear, is kill you from the moment it enters your life.

Now, dignity, that's different, because the world gives you that, and respect, well, that's a gift from outside, too. You can accept those. But watch out for pride." His Highness winked. "Because once you have it, you can't drop it or your whole life will shatter."

"I don't understand," said Asha.

"Nor do I expect you to," said His Highness. "But I fully intend to be a specter in your memory, and I shall be disappointed if my hauntings do not cause you to understand, some day. In the meantime, I urge you to take your best stab at it." He grinned and stood, dusting snow off his trousers. He opened wide his arms and enveloped Asha wholly in his coat. As he released her, she felt something pressed into her hand. "Keep it out of sight," said His Highness, and, with that, he was gone, waving at the children on his way to the train station.

Asha looked at her hand. Wadded in her fist was a bundle of bills that her scant knowledge of arithmetic couldn't sum. She slid the money into the pocket of her coat and buttoned it down.

The snowball fight had slid into truce; all the children were sitting on the front steps of the school. Asha could almost feel the weight of chores undone, and added her own. The children sat, warming their hands in their armpits, and listened to the sound of snow melting. "I'm bored," said one of the Carver boys.

"So do something," said Asha.

"Like what?"

"I don't know," said Asha. That wouldn't do, the specter of His Highness admonished. "Let's build a snowman," she said. The Carver boys thought it was a great idea, and leapt into action. In order to make a snowman, large snowballs have to be created, and large snowballs have to begin life as small snowballs. Despite the minor fights that broke out, the dozen

kids managed to roll three icy boulders from the main street, leaving criss-crossed dirt paths like worm trails behind them. They struggled to raise the man, and were streaked with freezing sweat by the time he stood upright.

While the girls relaxed on the steps, thinking about what to name their new friend, the boys fetched coal and sticks to form his eyes and arms. Together, they admired their creation. One small boy said: "Tell us a story!"

"He's not quite finished," said Asha. She took her uncle's hat from her head and stretched on her tiptoes to set it on the snowman's head. Before her heels had returned to the ground, a wild electric taste filled her mouth, and a wide, thunderous laughter boomed from somewhere deep in the snowman's chest.

A mouth melted open beneath the eyes, which now were burning orange and releasing lazy curves of smoke. "Dance with me!" called the snowman. Its stick-arms came up and hooked into the folds of Asha's coat. One of the girls screamed, but the snowman laughed all the louder. He began to bob and bounce as though on the water and then he leapt into a simple dance of circles.

Asha's tongue had frozen stiff but, as she was spun by the magical man, she felt a freedom overcome her fear; the sound of rushing air beat back everything but exhilaration. She spun with the man until she was so dizzy she couldn't keep the world under her feet. By that time, the Carver boys had joined in and expanded the circle, and Asha's girlfriends were close behind. One of the Carver boys helped her to her feet, and someone else put a hand under her arm to keep her upright, and the dance went on.

Somewhere, beneath the snowman's laughter, Asha could hear her mother yelling: "Come in from there! You look ridiculous!" The other children heard

their parents, too, but none of them paid any mind. They danced until the hidden grass burned from the friction; they danced until the mountains with their hidden coal nearly tumbled down around their ears.

CAUSE OF DEATH:

PRUNE HANDS

Yeah, so, in the Great Revision of '13, my boss got all us editors together in a room, doffed his sweaty black beanie and filled it with scraps of paper upon which were written the names of revered twentieth century authors, our projects for the next year or so. One by one, we dipped our hands in and, as each of my associates let out a whoop or donned a scowl, I prayed to the gods and to my shoes that I would draw Faulkner. I ached to take my stack of sharp red pens to the man's fleshy adjectives. The man standing next to me drew Joyce, and my stomach knotted, jumping to the rapid unfounded conclusion from such scant evidence that the hat contained only Modernists, now, and that I was practically assured a comforting answer to my prayers.

What I pulled out—after fumbling my finger tips through the few remaining scraps of paper, trying to

guess how good William's name might feel against my finger tips—as no such literary revolutionary. It wasn't even Woolf, alone in her room with her aimless tangents. I'll tell you who it was: the name begins with an H.P. and ends in a bubbling whimper—good old Howard Philips himself.

Let me explain a bit about the project I was about to undertake, the project that would lead me to the unenviable position I now find myself in, in the faint hope, the only that I can bloody well find for myself, that you, reader, will have the facility to avoid a similar fate.

It started with the Christian bible, centuries ago. Once upon a time, a king named Jimmy decided to have the bible translated into the common tongue, full of lipping consonants and injunctions to respect authority. The whole affair was undertaken so that Baptists and Mormons of the distant future could sound important during scripture readings. Anticipated those anachronists, did our Jimmy. Actually, it could be argued that the beginning of this whole mess started when the bible was initially assembled into the Latin Vulgate, but—

Down through the following centuries, the bible was translated, paraphrased, altered, colloquialized, and generally disseminated hundreds of times. At my last count, there were four hundred eighty English versions, including eighteen editions that included an apocryphal anecdote about the Lord granting his favor to those who gather, two or more, to cast a democratic vote.

Even as the ratio of Christians to Muslims equalized worldwide, new translations were coming out to appeal to the followers of Mohammad. As retaliation, or out of jealousy, the Qu'ran soon had a dozen, then two dozen different re-imaginings. My

favorite from that era is the library of hardbound graphic novels.

The rationalizations given to the news media, when such media gave up three column inches for literary news, was that all the projects had been designed to make holy scriptures applicable to modern living. It wasn't too long before Jesus was said to have been executed by spending an excruciating few seconds in a gas chamber; those nasty Romans declined him a comfy couch to lie on during the process and made him huddle, lonely, on the linoleum, those bastards.

Which brings me to '13, when my boss at the publishing house I worked for took inventory of the properties that weren't selling well. From those, he designed a survey for the public, conducted over a period of a month or so, to determine which books featured prose that was too archaic, words that were too dissipated and slanged up, to be appreciated by the modern reader. Then he put a moratorium on new manuscripts and set his whole editorial staff to revising the complete libraries of those particularly challenging authors. And I got saddled with Lovecraft.

I had a nightmare that afternoon as I dozed at my terminal, more to add tone and tint to my work than to reveal a secret in my psyche. I don't remember it now, but I wish I could, as it would surely be a more comforting memory than that of the past few days; I didn't even wake up sweating, just bleary eyed and with the taste of rotting coffee in my mouth. I got another cup from the office pot and sat down with a stack of manuscripts and a fresh pen.

I was maybe three words in when I made my first cut. As the bleeding tip of the pen skated over the offending phrase, I didn't so much hear a scream as feel it resonating in the bones of my skull, like a whisper amplified, furtive and harsh. Shrugging it off,

I scribbled a suggested change in the margin and went on.

Out came superfluous adjectives such as *eldritch*, *squamos*, and *bacchanalian*; into the breach went the catch-all *freaky*. Out came lengthy paragraphs devoted to terror that transfixes, in went the timeless clichés that conjured the same emotions in far fewer words, e.g. *I was quaking in my boots*; *My blood ran cold*; *I nearly shat myself*.

When I emerged from my work, undisturbed save that first, now nearly forgotten murmur, I found that most of the office lights were off. I stood, bringing my head above the level of the cubicle walls. Mine was the only one illuminated. Out the glass doors, filtering through the painted words of the publisher's name, I could see the lights of the hallway, but that was all.

I had to pee. I fumbled my hands across the maze of cubicle walls, guiding myself to the rest room. I pushed open the door and coughed, forgetting, as always, the sickening artificiality of the faux pine plug-in air freshener. My hand spidered up the wall until it tripped the light switch. Crackling fluorescent light lanced my pupils; one of the tubes was going out, flashing like a strobe.

Upon pulling down my zipper, I experienced what I hesitate to describe as *revulsion* as it was felt toward the perfectly normal thought of manipulating my member with my hands. I paused for a few seconds, seeking the origin of this disgust; it was difficult to locate—I was reminded of the sensation of a sleep numbed hand and the problem, upon first waking, of deciding whether it is the hand or the brow it is cast over which is without feeling—but I now believe that my most sensitive bits were afraid of my hands, which did, upon reflection, feel awfully grubby. Perhaps it was an instinct, writ in my brain by a long

dead god to prevent disease transmitted by bare skin. I obliged.

With some creativity of movement, I finished my business and stepped to the sink. I examined my hands, hoping to catch a glimpse of grime or gangrenous flesh, anything that could explain my penis' reaction. With the light flickering so badly, it was difficult to focus my eyes, but I don't recall seeing anything out of the ordinary; I did imagine—no, I *felt*—that, in the moments of blackness, something filthy coated my hands, but it vanished upon each downward stab of the unnatural light.

I twisted on the hot water tap and held my hands under, palms up. The flow gradually heated, like that in a pot of frogs. My skin was bright red before I thought to go for the soap. I scrubbed hard, rinsed, then dried twice on the rough paper towels. My hands were almost numb; what I could feel of the air around them was cold as rain. I spread my fingers and held them away from my body. I brought them to my nose and sniffed, but could only smell the faintly feminine odor of company soap.

I returned to my desk, gathered up a sheaf of stories to work on at home, and went to catch the train. I didn't do any more work that night, finding far more fulfillment in a Valium and a touch of whiskey from a nipples bottle.

It was a remedy I found myself turning to more frequently as the days and weeks of the project continued. My boss had set a deadline at New Year's for the whole department. The guy doing Joyce was hopping himself up five days a week, then sleeping a straight forty-eight on the weekends. I felt sorry for the poor bastard, at first, but as my own experiences became increasingly disturbing and distasteful, I nearly forgot that my co-workers existed. That's not entirely accurate; I knew they existed, I just didn't have room

in my mind to offer them, not since had settled, at first, the pleasant buzz of hard work, and not since that had been usurped by a gradually expanding sense of dread.

I found myself afraid of my own hands. Allow me to relate another anecdote. One of the activities that always has brought me comfort through distraction is cooking. Rarely do I cook for others—I don't have a girlfriend and when I bring someone home from the bar she is often more tired than hungry—but I do enjoy preparing small portions for myself. One Saturday, about a month before deadline, I decided to take some time for myself and put my hands to work on something a bit more personally profitable. They, the hands, had not felt as grimy as they had that first night on the project, and I had long since written the whole evening off as a fatigued delusion.

Nor did they feel so wretched as I rolled a lopsided cart through the wide aisles of the grocery, nor when I returned to my apartment with two armloads of raw ingredients, nor when I washed the money-grub and day grime off of my fingers in preparation. It wasn't until I was drying my hands that I felt the shudder of revulsion climb quickly from my stomach to a point halfway up my esophagus, where, perhaps, its momentum died. My bowels sank.

I stared at my hands. They looked perfectly normal; no discoloration or disfigurement could I detect. I closed my eyes and felt the sensation ease, but only just, because upon closing my eyes I was wrapped in whirling words: phrases of primal terror, poorly understood in their original form, clawed through the agitated red curtain behind my eyes. I recalled a practice from my childhood, used to soften me to sleep in the weeks following my near drowning, of harnessing conscious imagination to neuter the uninvited phantasms that play out like spools of

hissing tape in the back of the mind. I pictured my red pen, slashing through the angry words, invisible against the rear of my eyelids.

Opening my eyes again, I sensed the confusion of the moment cleansed in the wash of input, the sight of normalcy, the stove just there, the sink here, the familiar CD playing on the stereo. Whatever had gripped me faded as a migraine, swiftly becoming a memory, and memory, the sixth sense, is the easiest ignored.

I set about preparing my supper, grating cheese and simmering a garlic sauce while noodles cooked in a pot too large for the portion. Sunlight angled in from the fire escape, a lattice of iron shadows. At an idle moment, I sprawled in my easy chair and watched the design creep across the floor as the sun fell, feeling calm, thanks to the lateness of day, but at the same time rushed, thanks, I believe, to the observable change in the day. At night and at mid-day, the long sameness and the hours of heavy heat, flux is slow to occur; but as the sun both rises and sets, even the least observant human eye can detect the flow of daylight, and, with it, the ebb of time.

Time was running out on the project. Rubbing my hands together to stimulate the pulse of blood, I returned to the kitchen, all joy gone from what became the chore of finishing the meal. The noodles came out underdone.

I sat at the counter on a bar stool and dished myself up a plate with one hand while the other shuffled through the manuscripts I had yet to paraphrase and made a selection. Again dividing my tasks, my one hand lifted a forked coil of noodles to my mouth as the other made a bold red circle around the title of story. I bit down and froze, fork in my mouth, pen erect on the page; in that instant, I came to the explicit realization that I had prepared my

supper with my own two hands -- two hands which were, in the sudden space between stuttered heart beats, filthy both above and beneath the skin.

Bile rose in my throat; my tongue pulled away from the slimy mess I had just placed in my mouth, but not far enough. I gagged and twisted on my seat, vomit erupting through clenched teeth. I spit the fork out and fell with the violence of a second retch. The pen tumbled across the floor, leaving a thin red wake. My hands landed in the warm puddle and I knew I would never get the stink out. A third time, I puked; my guts were down to thin orange liquid, which the carpet was wicking away in an expanding halo.

I cleaned as best I could, not admitting how silly I looked with my hands jammed in my pockets, kicking at the stain with an old rag clenched between my toes. Then I went to bed, feeling too ill to work further that night.

Such occurrences became more frequent as the deadline for the project approached. Occasionally, I was convinced it was the stress of the job, but it was a job, in fact, that I enjoyed. In briefer moments, I feared that somehow I had unleashed the spirit of Lovecraft from his incantations-as-prose. I didn't understand half of what I was reading; oh, I understood the words, and easily found equitable phrases in modern English, but the configurations were foreign, a grammar of mystics and ancients.

The last confusion set to me at the deadline like a wild dog to a fresh corpse. This is the last story I have to tell.

The office was abustle with the comings and goings of lowly copyists; my co-workers and I, those of us who had yet to reach the end of our assignments, were breathing heavily of the sweaty and buzzing air, feeling like bees in a comb, which was not an analogy the mind had to stretch much to accept.

Our cubicles were rectangular, rather than hexagonal, but the similarities outweighed that minor structural difference. Occasionally, balls of crumpled paper sailed over my head, tossed by those editors whose projects had just come to a close, or by those who had just realized they would never make it in time.

For myself, I was one ream of paper shy of the end. Everything was complete—I had only to make a hard-copy for the archaic sensibilities of my boss and present it to him. I tore through the plastic of five hundred count sheaf of bright twenty weight and manhandled it into my printer's tray. One white corner leapt out at my finger as I was shifting the load and dug beneath the quick of my left index finger. I jerked back, nearly sticking myself with a game of five hundred pick up, then finished the immediate job and closed the tray. The machine began to whirl. The first page slid out, and I reached for it. It was the cover page, the table of contents, and my employee information. Directly over my name was a welt of bright red. I glanced down at my hand, my finger; blood was welling from beneath the tiny flap of sliced skin.

I moved as though to place the wound in my mouth, to suck the blood away, back into my system, but I could not complete the action. My stomach turned over at the thought and promise. In the recent days, I had taken to washing my hands more frequently, as the imagined conviction that they were dipped in crude oil, or dirtied somehow more deeply and less ordinary, had intensified steadily. I had taken to eating my food with chopsticks. Now, I held off the impulse to puke by sitting down and dropping my arms limply at my sides. I breathed heavily while the printer spit out page after page of clean white covered in ink, quickly applied, more quickly dried, and permanent.

The sting reported to me by my finger helped to anchor my senses to the practical world, but my fancy ran, believing my hands to be polluting the air. I tried to breathe slower, and only through my nose, but my lungs were crying for more oxygen, and I relented. This brought back the nausea.

A drop of blood formed at the tip of my finger. I felt it, at first, light as the crawl of a mosquito, then I opened my eyes to watch. A slow streamer snaked, bending once, over my nail to the end, depositing its contents on the waxing crescent. It was my body's tear, coalescing in the shape of a protruding tongue, extending, and finally breaking at the root. I heard its splash.

The time following is now muddled in my sense of history. I remember taking a fistful of papers and rubbing their edges across both of my palms, slicing and sneaking beneath the skin, as pins beneath finger nails. The paper was just as dirty as my hands, so it changed nothing. I couldn't breathe, and everything in my cubicle smelt rotten, dead, as a lifeless toad unable to shake or consume the flies and maggots that swarm it. I remember that others were watching me, now, and that the man who had done Joyce had his arms folded, a smug flare to his nostrils, probably out to get an ale at the pub down the street. I remember my boss rushing out of his office and standing well away as I painted bloody handprints on his carpet. I said, I quit, because I had to get out of there. I remember rushing to the bathroom and barely making it to the sink before vomiting, and then washing my hands in the vomit, first, and then the clear water from the sink, because I had to cleanse in gradations, because leaping from hell into heaven would kill.

Words are the stuff of magic. They carry much in their straight, stained lines. Do you speak in your dreams? I don't.

Only two things alleviate the taint in my hands—though neither can remove it completely—and of them I can bear only one. The first, the rejected salvation, is to take up a pen and write a sentence of my own. These sentences are my own. If you construct a sentence twelve words long, chances are it has never been printed before and will never be duplicated—not because you are that unique, but because the language slips so fast beneath your intended meaning. I can not, for long, do this—this in your hands is the product of three months' labor in blue ink—because the thought of writing touches off memory as though a match to black powder, and, though memory is docile, it is hideous in visage and I do not wish to look upon it. Not any more.

The other remedy, the one I must more often subscribe to, is to wash my hands at every moment, with boiling water, with harsh soaps, with a knob of steel wool; I scrub and scrub and scrub to cleanse the stain of my own disrespect. I mean, I just can't help myself.

GOODBYE, GRAND MOTHER

A blown kiss. “Hi, beauty. You look tired. Did you hear the news?” The Man doesn't pause between ideas, shoving them out of the airlock a step ahead of him. They're faster than the kiss.

The Woman is hunched heavy over a pad at the dining room table, an aching blue wash of light bleeding around her outline. She blows a strand of hair out of her eyes, adds a thumbprint to the corner of a document and sets the pad down.

“What?”

“The news. It's been all over the nets today.”

“I've been busy all day. I'm exhausted, love. We've only got until day after tomorrow to get this stuff in.”

The Man sneaks up behind the Woman and kisses her on the back of the neck, leaving no mark. She wipes the saliva off.

“Don't worry about the taxes. There's something more important.” He pushes on the pad, suspending its processes. Exasperated eyes turn to him and miss. He is gazing out the kitchen window. The horizon coughs up every point of light brave enough to reach this far from home.

“You have to start on the right foot, darling,” she chides. “Dad's will has covered for us so far, but it's out now. If we don't get the hang of it this year, we'll slip even further next year, and the year after that, and we'll end up buried under back taxes, and lose our home, birthing permit, and there's no way you'll handle your job—” He shuts her up with a kiss. He has chapped lips, and hasn't shaved. The Woman pulls her whole head away before romance takes.

“It's not important,” the Man says, meaning it.

“What's the news?”

“Earth's dead.”

“That's not news. No one's lived there for centuries.” The Woman grabs her pad, scowls at the pain in her back and stands. She stretches like a cat.

“No one's lived there, but it hasn't been dead,” the husband protests. “They're predicting a tectonic collapse, or something like that, before the week's out.”

“Why does that matter?” The words run back and forth down the hallway ahead of their owners and into the living room. The Woman slips down onto her cushion, match-molded fibers cradling her perfectly. She waits for relaxation to assert itself and then lifts the pad in front of her eyes again. It wakes up, blue light back.

“Because it's our home.”

“This is our home.”

A little bubble, a back yard, a few rooms, nice pictures of Grandma, Donnie, and pets they've never had.

“But it was built to look like Earth.”

“It was built to be comfortable. Shut up for a second.” She gives ham-handed acupuncture to the tax form. “We don't get a rebate this year.”

“Earth was our home.” Nothing. “Is Donnie here?”

“He went to a friend's house.”

“Which friend?”

“He didn't say.”

Quiet. Millions of miles away, magma spills from a gaping, dirty wound; a plate, slower than a glacier, takes out the aggravation of billions of years on its neighbor; the sound of screaming slowed down to a grumble, a roar, a shout. The protests shoot up into the black and blackening sky, lodge themselves in the stratosphere and die.

The Man can hear them. He cocks his head, turns to find another window and gazes unfocused. He opens his mouth to sigh, to start a sentence, but only gets as far as the sigh—

“Don't, honey. You were cloned and grown. Now come help me find our grocery receipts.”

She stands and stabs him with responsibility. Some time later, they go to bed without making love.



The Woman wakes up to a bed that doesn't feel cold, thanks to the layer of tiny fibers that friction heat the mattress, but does feel empty. Her brain takes a few seconds to yawn through its checklist. Everything is dark. It shouldn't be dark. There should be sun. There should be something else, *someone* else, another body.

“Honey?”

She props herself up on her elbows, hair swinging half a pendulum to a stop. The Man sits a few feet from the bed, far more than a million miles away. He

has a pad in his hand, and electrodes snake out from the machine to his temples.

“Honey.” Frustration hidden behind a sleep-smelling palm rubbed across her face. His eyes flick over to her, and for a full second they stand on either end of that bridge, staring. Then he turns back to the pad, and she shoots out her supports to fall back into the warmth of a bed to herself.

Comfort, yes, but it takes her quite some time to drift all the way down to sleep.

The Man falls even further, reading and listening to the words and thoughts of thousands of other men and women with quicker brains than his. The Earth will not last longer than tomorrow, or the day after. It managed to survive until a death of natural causes, though. No sacred Horsemen scour its face, no shining clouds herald the return of the Once and Ever King. It would be a foolish King who would make his way to Earth, now, riding on billows of poison and ash. Any Lord with such a steed would be welcome to whatever desolation he can grab.

The Man starts, opens his eyes from dreams about war on green hills burned brown. He pulls the 'trodos off, and coils them, deliberate as a drunkard. Gradually, his nose brings messages of wafting flavor to his brain. His stomach rumbles assent at the unspoken question, and the Man balances carefully to the kitchen.

“How late was I up last night?” instead of *Good morning, love.*

The Woman hands him a plate of potatoes. “Donnie already left for school. You're going to be late for work.”

“I don't think I'll work today. Earth could go at any minute.”

Sigh. "There will be a warning, lover one. These things don't happen instantaneously." And behind the chiding, "I wish you wouldn't do this."

"I just like to pay my respects."

"Remember when you missed Dad's funeral."

A forkful of potatoes gives more than adequate excuse to not reply. Instead, he says, "You are going to finish the taxes today?"

"Yes, dear."

"I'll be on the nets until lunch." He wipes his mouth and retreats.

The Woman scowls, lets it slowly melt into a deep breath, held, exhaled. That's the problem with the Jovian breeding system, her brain says without words. Physiological compatibility is more important than psychological.

The government must be clairvoyant. Their mail slot dings with an official notice and spits out a sheet of etched diamond. The Woman retrieves it, reads, and feeds it to the recycler.

She works until lunch, tossing numbers, doing chores to relax. Donnie comes home to eat. His hair is the color of the Red Hurricane, and the blood Russian ships. Yesterday it was black.

"Food's coming. Go get your Father."

"Dad's not at work?"

She shakes her head, and Donnie doesn't really care enough to try an inquisition. He takes off his shoes and hunches to the living room, carrying himself like he knows he'll take on the world, but he doesn't know it won't happen for another decade.

He slugs the Man on the arm. Eyes snap up, hollow from too many cathode rays. The Man takes a sip of water from a half-full glass near his elbow and knuckles away the focus from his eyes.

"Nice hair."

"Thanks. No work today?"

The Man cocks his head into a pause. "A holiday."

"School wasn't canceled. What's the occasion?"

"The end of the world."

A sniff from tiny nostrils. "You mean Earth, Yeah? Yeah, I heard about that. Some kids were talking about it at school today. Yeah. Mom says come to lunch." Donnie turns away, job finished, and somewhere in there is satisfaction. The Man comes up behind him, in perfect position for a fatherly hand that doesn't come.

"Don't you care?"

"Never lived there."

"Well, neither did I, but still."

"Still."

The little family rings the table and relaxes, good food in front, a car in their garage. The Woman's face is small, drawn in light pencil downcast. Donnie hears a hundred unspoken words, an argument, fly between his Mom and Dad, and doesn't interrupt the silence. He eats quick, pushes away from the table, pulls on his shoes and paints himself out of the picture.

The Man chews, completely absent, staring out the kitchen window. The Woman takes a bite, grinds a few unnecessary words into the food and swallows.

"There's something I have to tell you."

The Man wipes his mouth. Eyes still on the universe. He stands, turns, stops, turns. He replays the last few seconds in his brain, the auditory echo catching up. "What?"

"Are you listening?"

"Yes. Yes, of course."

"We've been given the instruction."

"What?" The Woman doesn't bother to repeat. A smile surfaces from the Man's face, a crocodile that she knew was there but couldn't see beneath the film of algae. "Really?"

“Yes.”

Quickening pace, and quick step. His hand is warm. She takes a shaky step away. The crocodile sinks. “What? What’s wrong, lover?”

“Tell me you’re going to work tomorrow.”

“But—”

“No, please. This is important to me. Promise.”

When the words come out of his mouth, the softness rises between them. If the stars go out, it doesn’t matter.



Finality; dissatisfaction, but finality. The woman lifts her finger from the transmit button. Right now, electrons carry money straight from safety into governmental troughs. Against all logic, the loss feels heavy -- everything in proportion to the zeroes.

The Woman lets a tonal sigh propel her back into her silhouette couch. Peace without thought. She smiles at the pictures on the mantelpiece, frowns at the thought of adding another, scowls at the skim of dust, jumps at the sound of the front door sliding open and closed.

She ignites a storm into the hallway on tired feet.

“Donnie! What are—” It’s not Donnie. It’s the Man, stargazing, jaw muscles creaking almost audibly. Lightning crackles the Woman’s teeth.

“What are you doing home?”

“It’s happening.” Distant. She knows, to the mile, how far away.

She slaps him. His mouth works to form the words: “You slapped me.” Nothing comes out.

She has never touched him outside the brittle boundaries of prescribed affection. She left a mark. “Fine. This is jeopardizing your family. I can’t stop you. If a dirty planet means more to you than being

the strength for us, I can't stop you." It's not true, the Man knows. She could stop him. It wouldn't take much more than another slap, the other cheek he turns to her as he looks away. The silence thickens, the air unwilling to shake sound through its emptiness. He hears words in between his ears; words he fears she will say. She says them.

"I'm filing for a transfer. You aren't stable."

He tries to blink, only gets halfway through. He rubs his eyelids. The words fade, so meaningless and dead now. He feels a rumble, and doesn't hear the sound of trumpets calling Christ. He whirls, faster than he meant, stomps down the hallway and into the living room. The Woman stands in shock, stunned by her own words, and melting slowly. With one sweep, the pictures, archives of a lifetime, fall into the Man's arms. He fumbles them straight, carries them—so light—to the back yard bubble.

The Woman flares. Her eyes moisten, boiling hot. She can't see and doesn't try to. She makes her way by memory to the washroom. Opens the medicine cabinet and only now wipes away the tears, for necessity's sake. She finds the bottles of poison and spermicide, the applicator, long and straight and deadly boring. She brings the flood back and blurs out her hands as they rub all trace of him from out of her.

Sparks catch. The pictures start to crackle, blacken. The Man stares, evaporating emotion in the heat. His Mother-in-Law's face stops smiling up at him, the lips reduced to carbon and energy. He follows a spark from her forehead to its reflection in the dome. It blinks out before it hits the top of the artificial sky. One less piece of light in a night that is dying, point by point.

"Goodbye, grand Mother."

GRAMMAR

The girl had her eyes set high. The last apple was gripping stubbornly to the cloudmost branch of her Father's scraggly tree. He had planted it the year she was born. It had grown to twice her height. The apple hung out of her tallest reach. She blew a lock of mousey hair out of her eyes. She was crowned with dirty leaves, as if the tree had been throwing its only ammunition at her, fighting for its last fruit.

The girl took a stone and threw it at the apple. She overshot. The stone sailed out of the yard and into the close, encroaching forest. Like all little girls, she hadn't bothered to think of what would happen if she failed.

"Ow!" came a voice from the forest. The girl's ears perked at the sound of a horse, not the heavy stamp of a working horse but the light toss of a hoof that can afford to be shod and reshod in silver.

The second the horse's head peered around a bend in the path, the girl darted into the house. The head was white, bled free of all the muddy browns and blacks that marked the peasant horses she knew. She slammed the door. Her father grumbled a little from his room, where he lay pillowed on a foul-smelling earthen jug. She bent to a knot hole and spied greedily out.

The man on the horse was stained with expensive purples and skin-deep crimsons. His cloak stretched past his back into a blanket for his mount. It was lined with soft, unsullied white fur. He held a whip with a brushed copper handle. The girl couldn't make it out at this distance, but she imagined the cord was soft brown skin, just enough to give a gentle prodding to a loyal marching steed or servant.

"Warrit, gel?" muttered her Father. She had heard him coming. Even on an earthen floor, his steps echoed.

"It's the king, father! I hit him with a stone!"

"You did what?" roared her father, already throwing open the door, letting his face fall. "Your majesty!" The king dismounted, still holding the whip. He reached a ginger-colored hand to his forehead and tested the anger of a bright red bump.

"I demand to know the meaning of this."

"My liege!" The girl's father bowed and scraped at the dry soil beneath his face. "It was my daughter!"

"Your daughter, for whom you are responsible. Where is she?" The girl's father pointed back to the house and the king flexed the hand holding his whip. "Tell her to come out this instant."

The girl came without being called, close enough to hear for herself. "I'm sorry, your majesty," she murmured.

"Sorry is an excellent way to be, girl."

The girl stared curiously up at the king. He was only a head taller than she. The strand of his whip was hard, black. His eyes were pale enough to be called white. There was no hint of amusement beneath his mustache. "Will you curtsy to your king, girl?" She did. "How old are you?"

"If it please your majesty, she is at her sixteenth since being named."

"You are in no position to question what would please his majesty, even were you sober." The girl laughed. The king turned back to her and brought a hand up to his nose, across the nostrils. He smelled of horse, rich and huge. "You are an impertinent girl."

"Majesty. I don't know that word."

"I would not expect you to. Tell me, what words do you know?"

"I know how to name each thing in this yard, and in the house. I know words to name you, and your horse. I know myself."

"You would name my horse for me?" There was no amusement blushing the King's face, but something similar brushed against his voice. "Do so."

"He looks a Thruppence to me, your majesty."

"You undervalue her, girl. What is your name?"

"Esmerelda," blurted her Father. He felt lost, hung-over, and he clutched at this tiny contribution as though it could save his life. The king stared down at the back of his head. A corner of his lip rose, pulling away from the grime and lice.

"Where is your mother, Esmerelda?"

The girl shrugged. Her father dared to roll back onto his heels. His eyes were level with his daughter's tiny breasts.

"Your majesty. She passed away last year. In winter."

"I've done all her work since then, lord. Plus his, when he's in his cups and bottles."

“Esme!”

Now the king laughed. “A daring girl. You shall lose your right arm for the stone. Your left, though, you will keep, as I trow the burden you are made to carry, here. What is it you do?”

The girl was speechless. How, she wondered, could he put, in a single sentence, the words to wound her straight next to a pleasant question? She opened her dirty mouth to retort.

“She is wool-spinner, lord. But, lord!” The king lifted both eyebrows up into his tousled hair.

“Yes?”

“Don't punish her haughtiness, lord. She is a stubborn girl—” a belch interrupted the plea. The king's nostrils flared, and the girl's father fought against the blood threatening to abandon his face.

“Stubborn is a word. Haughty. She thinks herself above her station. Shall I have her executed?”

Desperate instinct framed the father's next words. “She can spin straw into gold, my lord! She is only haughty, as you say, because her talent makes her so.”

“Straw into gold? Is this true, girl?” He fixed his eyes on the girl. She was silent. He slid his gaze down, over her small swelling. There was her Father's pleading face, peeping around her body like a groundhog testing the air to see if it's really Spring.

“Of course it is true, my lord. I told her to never tell. Can you imagine what would happen? Why, she would be drowned as a witch.”

“At least.” The king turned away and leaned an arm on his horse. He paused, and both the girl and her father balanced on the pressing of a knife's edge. The king swung up into his saddle. “Come, girl. With me. We shall see this magic of yours tonight. Afterward, if I am not pleased, you shall lose not one, but both of your arms. And you—” the king extended a hand to the girl and a glare to the father “—you shall speak

nothing of this. Not now, not ever. I shall send men to ensure you are properly stewarding this land tomorrow.”

The king pulled the girl up into the saddle. She felt his manhood grow into the small of her back as they clattered down the path on light, ringing hooves. She didn't cry.

A pair of eyes watched the forest. They blinked and creased as a grin pressed against them.



The castle smelled of piss and poor man's air. The girl said as much and the king exploded with laughter.

“Perhaps your tongue as well, lass.”

They had left the horse in the stables near the keep. Piles of dung clogged their steps to the double oaken doors. Some of the stench clung to the girl's shoes. She asked for leave to take a bath. The king responded with a heavy hand on her shoulder and a step closer.

He took her down worn stone steps. She went a pace in front, his hand not so much guiding as adding impetus. She slipped once or twice. His grip followed her down. The first time, he tried to offer his other palm, open in aid, but she brushed it away, knowing as she did that she had invited another chop on the block.

He halted her at the bottom of the steps. She blinked in the gloom. They were beneath the ground, surrounded by dark mouths that must have been doors. She opened her mouth to ask where they were. A sharp squeak halted the words at the tip of her tongue. The king hauled on an old, rusty door. It looked as though the rust was holding it together; given a good cleaning, it would be nothing more than an iron skeleton.

The king stepped aside, brushed the burnt red dust off his hands, and mocked her in a low bow.

“Your chambers, great sorceress.”

She slipped in like a mouse in short hurried steps measured with long pauses. The cell was a cylinder, several stories tall. A single high window shone dirty light and stink in a gray column, picking out the center of the floor and hiding everything else in black contrast. She moved into the light and shivers.

“What am I to do?” She paused long, received no answer. “If I am to spin, give me the wool.”

“Yes,” said the king. “Your wool.” He smirked.

How could her father do this? she thought. If only he had been sober—but no, her father's sobriety was no different from his drunkenness, merely interrupted by fewer belches and bawdy, repetitive stories.

“The straw, then.” She drew herself just out of the light, letting it fall between her and the king.

“I shall have my steward bring you a small pile. I expect to be pleased by the morning. If I am not, you lose your arms.”

“And perhaps a leg and tongue,” the girl shot back.

“Which would all be a shame, lass. You are quite beautiful, in your woodsy way. No matter. If your magic carries you through the night, however, you can be sure that I shall give you a bath, a few nice clothes and trinkets, and a warmer, fuller bed to sleep in.”

“Yours?”

He crossed the room and slapped her. The weight behind the blow drove her to her knees, scabbed from the forest, now scraped on the cold stone. The king turned and left. The door squealed shut and a bar shot through a lock like a thunderclap.

“God's wounds!” screamed the girl. She pounded a shuddering fist against the floor. She imagined her

curse battering against the walls of her cell like a bat in a cage, finally finding the small window, blistering across the sky and into the Lord's magnificent eye. "Give me strength." These words dripped out of her mouth and into a cold puddle on the stones.

The steward arrived some hours later with a bemused expression, a small cart of straw, and a spinning wheel. He warned the girl against accidentally pricking herself on the spindle and she glared. The steward gave her an amiable shrug, halted an habitual bow, and slipped out the door.

The girl lifted a piece of straw and twirled it in her fingers. The light was deepening in color, heading toward pure black. She kicked at the spinning wheel. It was old, cracked, and mostly useless. She didn't think she could even spin wool on such a machine; that is, if she knew how to spin wool.

She cried small tears. They dripped out of her open eyes, off her chin, onto the floor, into the cracks between the flagstones.

"Hsst!"

Startled, the girl looked around. It had sounded like a cat. It was nearly full dark now; the window hung in the sky like a malformed moon. A squat silhouette leapt at the hole and whuffed like an ancient dog.

"I say! Hsst!"

"Who is there?"

"A charming little beggar boy? No! Not such! I am a helper, a creature, a tinker and thinker, and transfigurator—specializing in the plain and the ordinary." During the speech, the silhouette crawled down the wall of the cell, now speaking into its own chest as it flipped easily over a handhold, now grinning its words up into the girl's shadowed face. "I heard from the birds and the wind of your plight and

would offer my humble services to you, if you would take me.”

“You would help me spin this straw to gold?”

“I would spin this straw to gold, meadow lark. You would sleep. You look as though you need it.”

“But why would you help me?”

She peered at the man. He was squat and nimble, wide-mouthed, deep-chested, and musical in tone. He was a contrast walking, and the girl would not have been surprised if, in daylight, his face was Moorish on one half and Norse on the other.

His head tilted and she hears what must be dry skin creaking as his mouth gapes even further.

“You are beautiful, my woodsy girl. I would help you just for this chance to look on you again. Now take you to that corner and lay down your worries as your pillow. Come morning, I shall be gone, and this straw shall be gold.”

The girl did as she was told. As she slid into a dream of white horses and small, wet sounds, she heard the frantic squeaking of the wheel, whirling around its unusual task.

The little man smiled as she slept and let a word fall off his tongue, honey and magic, over and over again. Each time the word found straw it spread, thick and sticky, softening the fibers and staining them gold. The bobbin spun, collecting thick, rich strands that would echo the sun come the morning.



The girl was awake before light. Her dreams had been troubled and the floor too cold for a comfortable sleep. She let her eyes slit open, fearful of seeing a pile of straw, and berating herself for having fallen asleep. The little man could have done anything he pleased to her, but it had seemed like the right thing to do at the

time, to curl up and forget, to be haunted by strange dreams instead of hideous reality.

The pile of straw was gone. Seven bobbins absolutely full of spun gold stood in a neat row beneath the wheel. The small tendons in her feet started to spasm uncontrollably as she stood. She picked up one of the bobbins. The thread was almost warm; it at least carried the memory of warmth, as though all gold were descended from sunlight.

She dropped the bobbin and whirled around, certain she had felt eyes on her neck. There was no one else in the room. She looked up; no one was at the window. The little smiling man was gone, and might not ever have been there if it weren't for the riches flanking the old wooden wheel. She bent down to right the spilled bobbin and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

The sun was climbing higher, but the light in the cell was still cold and gray. The door wailed and the king strode in. His eyes fumbled about in the dimness, came to rest on the seven bobbins. He was surprised, yes, and shocked, but mostly pleased, having gotten to be king by delighting in surprising fortune.

“Well, well, girl! You have been busy, haven't you?”

The girl bobbed a curtsey, peering past his cape while her eyes were down. The steward stood in the doorway, mouth like a fish's.

“Stand up, girl. Esmerelda. And tell me: how is it that you were able to do all this?” The girl bobbed again. She bubbled small words that meant nothing and the king grumbled, reminding her of the previous day. “Answer me plain, girl. You do not, after all, need your tongue to spin.”

“Please, your majesty, it was so hard,” she begged, hoping to draw some sympathy like a veil across his face. For a moment, there was something in the way

his eyes were set, but it tore from ceiling to floor as the sun spiked onto the wheel and the gold shimmered anew with faerie promise.

The king's mouth opened, stuck between a word and a sound of glory. He swallowed, settled on a word.

"I shall be that much more pleased to see my wealth increased on the morrow, then. Steward: I am satisfied. Tell Rickard that he may go back to the kitchens." The steward turned and muttered. A pair of heavy boots scraped up the stairs. The girl didn't see to whom they belonged.

The king smoothed his mustache. "Bring her bread and water. And another batch of straw. Larger this time."

The king himself bent and stacked the bobbins in his arms, letting his thick gloves brush against the grime of the floor and trail through the small stagnant puddles. He almost dropped one of the spools. He chuckled to himself, adjusted his armload, and swept out of the cell without another word.

Around mid-day, as the girl judged by the slant of the sun, the steward returned with two cartfuls of straw and a bit of a smirk.

"My privacy, sir."

She sat in front of the spindle, enclosed by the dirty yellow piles. Her thoughts blurred across the whole spectrum from fear to outrage. Would the little man return? The empty light started to spill out of the cell. It was getting darker by the second. Her eyes were getting emptier.

As the last bit of sun faded, she picked up a single spear of straw. She placed it on the wheel and pumped the pedal. The straw just sat there, unwound and untouched. She trawled her dreams, trying to dig up the words the little man had spoken as he spun. They had sounded like: Truth-in-broken-cousin. She let the sounds elbow their own way off her tongue, and got a

mush of muddled tongue and meaning. Nothing happened.

She sobbed, just once.

“Hsst!”

The sharp whisper lanced down into her prison and she looked up with a shining, invisible smile. “You’ve returned!”

A little, echoing laugh made its scampering descent from the window. “Never before have I heard such a pretty phrase to greet me. Never before. I am a happy little man, and helper, too. The birds and wind—” he was in front of her, now, and a little closer than she might like. She could smell him; he smelled as though he had never bathed. “—they told me of your second task. Don’t worry, my little woody wench! These things always come in threes. Nearly finished now, nearly done.”

“You will help me again?”

“I may.”

“Oh, but sir—” her words were cracked by his laugh, but she stumbled ahead like a young aristocrat anyway. “—you must help me!”

“Must I? I helped you once, and where’s your gratitude? Naught but a smile for the little tinkering, thinkering man.”

“What could I give you? I have nothing!”

“You have your berry lips, little help-lass. If I could taste of them, then I would feel the strength to spin the whole of the night, every star from its silver light into soft silk. Just a kiss, little gel.”

“Just a kiss?” The girl’s lips peeled back of their own. She pursed them, purposefully. The man stank, but surely a little taste of bad breath would be worth the freedom it would buy her. She nodded. The little man didn’t dance or clap his hands. He just tilted his head up, opened his eyes wide and pushed out his distended lips.

The girl closed her eyes and shuddered down until their lips met. He tasted of wood-smoke and old potatoes; she, the mold of captivity. When she pulled away, she saw a sadness in his eyes, suspended by his bushy arching eyebrows.

“There,” she managed. “Is it to my lord's pleasure?”

The little man laughed again, transforming his eyes into thin slits of humor. “Your lord, lass, will never kiss you. Now get you again to sleep, and dream of the future. When you wake, your king's treasury shall be deeper, and you that much closer to breathing back the open air of your happy forest home.”

She obeyed, gratefully. She chewed on her lips, but couldn't dislodge the taste of him. Nor could she shake the thought of her happy home, reeking of alcohol, floored in dirt, and sparsely draped in small, wrinkled fruits and last month's vegetables.



Morning came with a fanfare. The door burst open while the girl was still blinking the night away. She had slept in this morning. Already the sun was making brilliant fourteen bobbins full of gold. The king shoulders his way past the heralds as they are lowering their trumpets. There were other men clustered in the hall outside the cell, all robed in finery and identical in their gaping expression.

“Stay out of the way, girl,” his majesty hissed. Then, louder, “See, good men? Pure gold! You may test it if you like. I have been very thorough, of course, but there is no need for me to be fearful of your happening upon a clever trick or jest. The girl is far too bovine, and I am far too blessed!”

The king underhanded one bobbin to the gathered men. They conferred among themselves in

voices too low for the girl to make out. Before long, one man cleared his throat.

“We can find no fault in the alchemy, your majesty,” he said.

The king beamed. “Esmerelda—” he tossed over his shoulder as he loaded his arms with the riches “—if tonight you can turn all the stables' bedding to gold, you shall have golden bedding of your own. I swear on my family name.”

The door shut. The girl was again alone and cold. She stood still, a rod of cold iron seeming to splint her spine. Hours passed. Daylight waned. She didn't bother to capture her thoughts and wrap language around them. They washed around her in red waves, chilling her and warming her in their ill-timed turns. Monsters, or ghosts of monsters, or voices of ghosts, or the taste of voices. Nothing made sense. Freedom comes when you don't have to think—but she halted that thought before it fully formed, narrowing her eyes at the cracking mortar of her cell.

Freedom was the forest and the monolithic stones she used to play were castles before they were quarried, hewn down, made into gravestones and dungeon bricks, the bricks that blocked her sight and smell.

One more night. The moon rose.

The girl stretched her shoulder blades apart, letting the iron holding them straight dissolve. She hunched her back and took a good look around the cell. The steward hadn't come by during the day with a new load of old straw. Did the king expect her to perform out in the stables, where he could watch her and her deception.

“Hsst!”

No, not yet, thought the girl. She clenched her fists and closed her eyes. She smelled the smoke and sweat of the little man, getting stronger and stronger.

"I heard another rumor, woodsy girl."

Her teeth were clenched as fists. She pummeled out her words.

"There is naught here for you."

"Naught and nothing? Oh, but hear how wrong you are!"

The door squeaked and the steward backed into the room. He was tugging on a huge mat, spilling over with dirty straw. His back was straining, and his white hands were covered in dung. He dropped the mat, turned, and glared at the girl, huffing loudly so she would take notice. Gradually his eyes trickled off her cold, unresponsive stare and down to the wide-eyed, grinning face of the little man.

"Who is—"

The little man opened his mouth and spoke one word. It entered the girl's ears, she was certain, but she couldn't remember what it sounded like, or how it felt, or tasted. It had had a smell, she knew, but it had only touched the tip of her nose, like a sweet kiss, then giggled away.

The Steward's eyes rolled up into the high corners, then clicked back down. He scowled, grumbled, "There are eight more matfuls," and never looked at the little man again.

The girl did. She was met with the widest grin yet, and a shrug.

"What's your name, my girl?" the little man asked.

"Mother called me Esmerelda."

The little man hummed her name without opening his mouth, just letting the sounds drift around his tongue and teeth. He swallowed and spoke.

"You have quite a job to do tonight.

"Me? But I thought—"

"Of course I'll help you. But this time not for your beauty, and not for your kiss."

The steward backed into the room, grumbling, hauling another mat. The little man didn't speak until he had left for the next.

"This will be the largest favor I have done for you. And what have you given me?"

"My beauty. My kiss," stammered the girl, missing his oddly twisted and musical words.

"Not enough. Not much, and not enough. I need much more from you, tonight, in exchange for this. My fingers will bleed, and my tongue will be bruised and thick in the morning"

"Then what? What do you want for this?"

The little man walked in a small circle, blowing air between his teeth, half-whistling. The tune wriggled through the girl's ears and made her want to go swimming.

"If the king returns tomorrow and finds you sleeping amid a pile of horseshit and hay, you will lose your fingers, your hands, your arms, your legs, your pretty breasts and nose. He won't speak to you. He will be cold, silent, but right there in front of you, watching Toothless Rickard at his work. You will plead for a morsel of pity, at least until your tongue comes out. He will take your house as the crown's and kill your father; a swifter punishment than yours, for certain, but no less hideous. And when you are gone and thrown into the pit, I will swing past, drop my pants, and take a shit on your ungrateful grave."

"But sir—" a sharp laugh "—please! I haven't . . . I mean, I don't even know what you want me to do." She saw herself underground, covered over with soil, and his hairy arse adding derision to death. She is sure that soft jade grass would cover her everywhere but that one spot, which would be brown, cracked, and fever hot.

He stopped whistling. "Your maidenhead," he said.

“No!” She backed up. He matched her steps. She flattened herself against the freezing wall. The steward entered, gave her a funny look, dusted off his hands, and left again. “Help!” she cried, fruitlessly.

The little man stared into her belly. “Give me your maidenhead,” he said. “A child will come of it. The child will be mine, without question or care.”

The girl lost control of her tongue. She babbled, was silent, screamed; it made no difference to the little man. The steward came and went, finally bringing in the last haul of straw. The piles ringed the doorway, blocking it from sight. In a moment of silence, the girl heard the door shut, a delayed echo of her hysteria. The bolt pierced the lock.

A sob—she realized it was hers. She brought herself up straight and focused on the little man. He hadn't moved an inch or whisker.

“Well?”

“You shall have my firstborn child.”

“And your first time, whore.”

The dark words scrambled up her legs and dug dirty hands into her stomach. “And my maidenhead,” she said.

“Good. Then I can help you! Bring the wheel.”

She tugged the old machine in fits and starts, filling her palms with splinters. The little man wandered among the piles of filthy straw, muttering under his breath and poking at the odd lump of dung.

“Lie here.” He pointed at a pile much cleaner than the rest. Cold, she stretched on the straw. “Lift up your skirts.” She tried to let her eyes anchor on a point on the ceiling, but it was far too dark, the ceiling invisible. Her eyes wandered, loose and frightened by the freedom.

She felt a stab of warmth. She didn't dare look. It felt like a beetle crawling between her legs with small warm feet. She closed her eyes the first time he

groaned, squeezed them tighter the second time, and sobbed the third.

“All done, princess, all done. Now, you must go to sleep and remember what you've promised. Golden dreams, my little woody girl. Golden dreams.”

She didn't open her eyes. Her skirts were bunched about her waist. Her sex was held in the palm of the hot, stagnant air. The wheel started to spin, squeaking each revolution, rhythmic, a songbird. She couldn't think of anything but the in and out, her mind producing dreamlike images of things she hadn't seen, of his thing, of him bending over her, and he squeaked like a wheel every time he pressed into her.

The little man watched the girl fall asleep while his tongue and fingers pulled the straw through the dyeing magic. “Don't forget, child.”



He was gone when she woke halfway through the night. The wheel was silent. The straw was gone; even the smell of dung had drifted away, replaced by that summer apples and cut bark. She shivered through a short chain of half-formed thoughts. She fell asleep again, to dreams of giving birth.

Her child bawled into the world. It was a dwarf with a hook nose and long beard. Its teeth were yellow and it wouldn't stop grinning. The twisted mouth gaped wider and wider, giving its own birth to a mirror lodged in the short stump of a throat. The mirror cracked, and each shard reflected a new ray of light, brighter and brighter and then morning was on her.

“I told you to get on your feet, girl.” The king was standing in front of her. She hadn't heard the door, his boots, his first order. She pushed herself up off the floor, leaving her head bowed. Even the straw she had slept on had been taken. Turned to gold? She wanted

desperately to look around, to make sure the payment the little man had taken had been worth the product. She pulled her curiosity down under the hoods of her eyes and curtsied.

The king was wearing his soft skin gloves. He stroked her cheek with one and pulled a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Do you know how rich I am?” She shook her head. “Enough that I could start a crusade of my own into the Holy Lands, and may well do just that, if the mood takes me. I can pay off all the debts the realm incurred before my kingship.” He laughed. “I could buy France.” He started to walk around behind her. The king sighed deeply; she could hear the way his cynical smile shaped the sound. “I can not, however, allow this wealth to spread. If every peasant father had even a spoonful of gold for his dirt-grubbing family, then my own treasury would be that much less valuable—not to mention that much poorer.

“So, my girl—” he was in front of her again “—I can't, you see, allow you to go home. You would bring the news of my wealth to your father, and he would tell it to his ale, and be overheard by every filthy little thing that sweats beside you folk in the fields. You must stay with me.”

“Yes, your majesty.” At least there would be food.

“As simple as that, girl?”

“My father is a bastard, your majesty.”

“That I don't doubt. Not even coming from you.” The king breathed gold deep into his lungs and exhaled hesitantly. “You will be cleaned up and looked after. I will allow you run of the keep and castle, with this one condition: you may not speak. If I learn that you have opened your mouth even once save to stuff your face, then you will spend the rest of your years here. Right here.” The king's hand stabbed down to

the floor. The girl almost laughed to see how the soft leather wobbled and waved, like a turkey's wattle, like a little clown gamboling in his motley. "Do you understand me, girl?"

She looked up and nodded.

"Good. I will get you a bath, after you help me carry this to my treasury."



Before long, the girl had learned the ways of the keep. She spent a good deal of her time in the kitchens, because it was warm there and smelled as she always thought summers should smell. Once she was reaching for a pasty and, burning her callused fingertips, let out a yelp of pain. The kitchen maids all craned their necks to stare at this child they had been told was a mute. The girl was mortified. She would be damned by any words of explanation, and silence offered suspicion. Thinking quickly, she made a few sounds like a fool, tongue glued firmly to the top of her mouth. The head cook shook her dimpled head, dislodging flakes of pity. She handed the girl a cooler pasty and shooed her out of the kitchen.

The girl threw the pasty to a dog. Then she kicked the dog in the ribs. It snarled at her. She kicked it again, then ran.

The king heard about the incident and beat her. It was not seemly for a king's consort to behave so in the presence of servants. "I told them you were mute, not an imbecile," he had said.

As the months went on, became filled and round by the mystery child in her womb. She sat long in her chambers, just down the hall from the king's, within hollering distance. He had cursed when the maids told him she was expecting. Then he came to her at night

and explained the situation to her, and warned her again not to speak.

The king took her when he liked. The girl wanted him to be sure that her child was his, as much as she detested his loves of gold and iron. If he suspected even the smallest amount that the child, the freak it would certainly be, were not his, he would kill her. That had been an unspoken part of their agreement. So, whenever he came to her, she wouldn't make a move of protest, much less a sound. The first time, she prayed his strong seed would clean her, clear the field planted by the little man. She only felt dirtier.

And now, her husband gone to France to fight a battle that he excitedly called a war, she fidgeted with her skirts and waited for happy news. To distract herself, she watched the sun crawl across the floor.



There was a clearing, far from castle and town, floored with deep moss and roofed with ancient branches woven into each other like lovers only wish they could be.

At its center sat the little man, humming to himself with his eyes closed. He listened to the wind buffeting the leaves, the leaves speaking like cicadas. His legs were crossed and his gnarled fingers danced over them. He smiled as though coming to a decision.

He creaked to his knees and then to his feet. He turned in a slow circle. He spied an old tree, twice struck by lightning and nearly outweighing its own roots. He padded over to it.

Masked behind a mass of thick brush, three men in black watched as the little man stroked the bark of the tree and murmured words they couldn't hear. One man held a tiny crossbow, its string wound so tight it

almost hummed. The other two held daggers, blackened so as not to glint in the filtered sunlight.

The little man took a step back, sucked in a great breath and screamed. His tongue moved as though it were shaping words, but all the assassins could hear was one long wail, the sound of a lone wolf, of a whole pack's answer, of the moon tearing in half and dripping her pain on the oceans. They covered their ears and squinted shut their eyes.

With their eyes closed, they didn't see the ancient tree topple, they couldn't see the trunk suddenly hollow, sprouting a doorway here, a small window frame there. They couldn't see the tiny bluebird flung from its nest or hear it chattering angrily into the netted branches.

The little man closed his mouth. Through it all, the air never moved beyond a breeze; but now it felt cooler, emptier. The assassins opened their eyes.

They saw the little man rap on the front door, putting his ear against it, testing its resonance. He poked a finger into the window frame, scratching at the smooth wood. He rocked onto his heels and clasped his hands behind his back. He whistled a tune, light and twisting as a curl of wood smoke.

The crossbow bolt stuck into his back. His groan of pain was visible, but silent. He reached one fluttering hand to finger the shaft, curled his fist around it, and yanked. He fell to his knees.

Daggers out, the other two assassins rushed him. The little man held the bolt in his right hand. He muttered a word and the blood vanished from its metal head, from the stained shirt on his back. He turned to face the assassins. His eyes were wild, angry, dark and getting darker.

He opened his mouth. One word slithered out and brought the world to a halt. Something blurred. A head fell into the moss, painting the green with red.

The thick ground swallowed it up. Then there was nothing but the peaceful clearing and the twitter of the homeless bluebird as it flew away.

The little man didn't smile. He heard the thrashing of the third assassin as he fought through the trees, blind with horror. The little man started to run. He dodged branches and melted through underbrush, shaded out of sight and silent. He stopped, breathing steadily. He was ahead of his quarry, the crunching of the assassin coming toward him, now.

The assassin nearly stumbled past the little man, hollow eyes grasping at the path ahead. A small, strong hand whipped out, grabbed him under the ribcage, and pulled. There was a crack and a scream. The assassin fell to the ground and looked up at the little man, who opened his mouth.

There was fire, this time. A soft rain put it out.



The girl had never taken up stitching as the king's other maids and consorts had. They had tried to teach her, at the king's insistence, but the needles had hurt her fingers, and the other girls had been too jealous of her to keep up the lessons. Not having much for distraction, she sat in front of her highest window and brooded on her plan. She looked down on the rows of apple trees of the king's orchard. It was near to spring, but the trailing ends of cold and snow still clung to the mud and draped over the trees and fields like the train of a cape. The girl watched snow melt and considered spitting on one of the guards stationed at the foot of the keep.

A bird, desperately beating the air, grabbed her idle attention. It flew the way the king moved when he was drunk, listing mad back and forth, but somehow

moving steady to his goal. The bird started to circle, gaining altitude. The girl stepped back from the window, puzzlement claiming the color of her cheeks.

The bird flew to her sill and stopped, folding its wings and shrugging like an old man testing the warmth of his coat.

“My lady? Have I news for you?” Its voice was so light, buffeted by a light breeze. Everything it said seemed to be a question in tone.

“Have you?”

“You haven't heard the news?”

“I haven't heard anything, little bird. Tell me your news.”

“Did I live in the clearing, near to the little man? Did I overhear him singing about the lady and her baby—and did he call the child his own?”

The bird kept leaping back and forth on the sill, its head taking in all the room and world in fast movements, like wet lightning. The girl sat down and cupped her hands around her belly.

“You know where the little man lives. What of my assassins?”

“My lady? They were men dressed all in shadows?”

“Yes. The finest assassins in my lord's flock.”

“Did you hear the word the little man spoke? Why did he make the men so apart? Did you see the blood?”

“He . . . killed them.”

“Did you see him break my nest? Why did he do that? Why did he sing about my lady's baby?” The bird hopped a couple times. Its talons were so small as to be invisible, but the girl could hear the small click every time it moved. She hugged her stomach tighter. The little man was still alive. He had killed the finest murderers in the land.

“He spoke a word to do this?”

“Yes, yes, yes.”

The girl closed her eyes, heard the squeak of the spinning wheel, and something softer and more magical beneath.

“Did you hear what he said?” The bird was silent. It dug its beak into its breast. “Speak,” said the girl.

“My lady? If I speak, will it hurt?”

The girl hadn't considered that. She thought for a moment, then she raised herself and crossed to an expensive writing desk. She had insisted the king teach her to read and write, as an alternative to needlepoint. She had written a letter to her father. The king had come to her while she was writing it. He had thrown it in the fire and was rough to her that night.

She took a sheet of rough paper and placed it in the center of the desk. The inkwell was half-filled. She took it and spilled a small puddle next to the paper. A beckon, and the bird perched on her shoulder.

“Make the sounds, here.”

The bird bobbed between staring into the girl's ear and at the spreading pool of ink.

“My lady? What does a sound look like?”

She took the bird to her bed and taught it in the voice of a patient wind. Some time later, she watched its forked black feet hop across the page, spelling a word. Then she wrung the bird's neck.



After she had given birth, she held her baby and traced the line of its mouth over and over. She was glad to have it out of her, and glad that it slept beside her in her bed.

But when the king came home, he would know. He would know it wasn't his, or suspect her magic somehow twisted his firstborn.

He wouldn't know. The girl stretched, letting her muscles scream themselves hoarse. The baby pulled a breath into its small, sunken chest and stretched its horrible wide mouth into a yawn.

One of the maids knocked and opened the door.

"My lady. A visitor to see you." The maid's eyes were glazed. The new mother sank a shudder under the warmth of her quilts and nodded. The maid backed out and the little man waddled in. He hopped up onto her bed.

"Well, well, my little woodsy girl. What have we here?"

He tried to peer at the baby, but the girl blocked his view.

"This child is not yours."

"Now, now, we had an agreement. You have paid for but half the price of your gold. I'm here for my other half."

"Why not go father your bastard on some peasant girl?"

"That is what I did. Give me the child."

The girl scooped her baby to her breast. Its head snapped forward and back before she remembered to place her hand beneath its neck. As she died, she bit down on another shudder of revulsion. The little man was crawling towards her, his eyes going black.

"You don't dare harm me. Not while I hold your child. Reason with me."

"You are a half-wit, and a girl beneath that. You have seen what I can do." He grinned, empty. "And you may not have heard, but I took care of those men you sent to bargain with me."

The girl took a deep breath and clutched the baby tighter, feeling its skull dig into the flesh over her heart.

"I heard. I heard more than you think."

He paused and leaned back on his haunches, narrowing his eyes. "What?"

"I know the word."

"What!" he exploded and leapt back. He somersaulted off the bed and out of sight. The girl could hear him, pacing, frantic and muttering.

"It's true. I know your secret."

His head flew over the baseboard, framed by two gnarled, angry hands. "You know nothing. You are less than the cows in the field. You are just the field."

She opened her mouth and the first syllable crawled off her tongue. It tasted like the searing heat of vomit. Her ears refused to let it into her head. She felt as though she were silent, mute. The little man screamed to cut her off and she covered the baby's ears.

"No! No, you can not use that word. That word is my name! It is not yours to use." He gave her names of her own, again and again, never repeating himself. She bit her lip, drawing blood.

He whirled and yelled a word she had never heard. She felt suddenly strange, as though dreaming. Beaten by strangers and left on the roadside. Nursed and raped by a wild boar. Sold into slavery by her brother but she doesn't have a brother and she isn't a hard worker.

She looked down and screamed. Her legs were gone. The little man stood where they used to be, smirking.

"I have more words, brazen bitch."

Her heart stopped and sank to her stomach. She felt it throbbing, empty. She had vomited everything when the contractions started.

She opened her mouth and forgot everything except a fear that burnt her hair black and a plea that brought her heart back to her chest.

Minutes passed. She looked down at her baby. It wasn't breathing. She pulled her hand away from its neck. Its head flopped into her blankets.

The little man was gone. There was blood on the walls.

The king stormed in, some time later. He demanded to see his child. The girl's ears were ringing. She couldn't hear him. He leaned over her, shook her, slapped her hard across an already red cheek.

The word came to her again, and this time everything went black.

She called herself the queen, and, with urging, the extended royal family took it up. She ruled a fearful kingdom. Those who hadn't seen her had heard. She became barren, would never produce an heir. No one had the manhood to urge her from the throne.

She visited her father twice. The first time, she gave him the corpse of her baby and told him to bury it. A week later, she returned, found him drunk and the baby rotting in a corner. She told her honored guard to plug their ears. She spoke, briefly, and then returned to the castle. It took her two baths in water and one in milk to wash the stench of smoke away.

She chose Wednesdays for court days, presenting herself before her subjects. It wouldn't do for their queen to be disfigured, though, so she sent for a local artifax. He crafted her a pair of wooden legs, wrapped in soft deer skin. Her maids help her into the throne before any of the courtiers arrive.

She made her judgments harsh and sever. She only knew so much.

Whenever she grew bored listening to small complaints of land and marriage, she would wriggle the stumps of her legs together, watching the stilts of

rumpled skin flap like fool's motley. They made a sound like that of a timid grasshopper. She would laugh to herself. No one else dared understand the joke.

OUIJA GIRLS

There were two little girls in the attic of a tiny house. It wasn't an attic like those in the movies, full of nooks and ironbound trunks and dusty windows; it was practically a crawlspace, the leftovers between ceiling and shallow, peaked roof. It was hot and smelled like burnt insulation, which scrapes your sinuses raw.

The two girls, Melody and May, were cousins. Their mothers had been sisters, and had lived across the hedge from one another since before the girls were born. Both of their mothers had died the last year, one right after the other. May's mother had gone second, and after the memorial service she had heard her father say, "Can't have a hen session 'cross death, could she?" and snort.

May missed her mother very much; she had had a quiet voice, but without a trace of vibrato. When she talked to her father, May's voice always shook. Her

lungs quaked and pumped air uncertainly. "I want to go to my room," she would say, and only every other word would make it higher than a whisper. Her mother could say, "Just watch the show," when her father was acting up, and it would sound like the flat growl of the family dog.

Melody missed her mother in a different fashion. She didn't like to play tea party with May so much anymore, partly because they were getting too old for that sort of thing, but mostly because all her dolls were as old as last Christmas, and her father hadn't bought her any new ones. She had other games she liked to play, though; it had been Melody's idea to use the board when they found it in May's attic, as they played out of sight of May's father.

"How does it work?" asked May. There was sweat in her eyes. She kept wiping them with her grimy fingers and making it worse.

"We both put our hands on it, like this." Melody demonstrated, resting her fingers on the marker. She was wearing a ring on each finger, costume jewelry she had found in a box of May's mother's things.

"All right," said May. She wanted to play outside, but she knew that if she went Melody would just stay in the attic until either she came back or the fun ran out. May put her hands on the marker and jumped a little as Melody flexed her knuckles.

"Now we wait," said Melody.

A trickle of sweat began to itch just above May's eyebrow. She blinked a few times, trying to dislodge it. On the other side of the board, Melody had closed her eyes. May started to lift one of her hands from the marker when Melody said, "Don't. You'll break the spell."

A door slammed in the house and both girls could hear heavy boots on linoleum. May blinked again, then closed her eyes, as much to keep out the

sweat as anything else. She breathed in the attic's particular air, thick with dust and heat. A whiff of her mother's skin lotion came through the soup and made her open her eyes. Melody was staring back at her.

"I can feel her," said Melody. Both girls looked down at the board. The marker was moving across the letters with an audible hiss, digging into the cheap cardboard. Downstairs, May's father yelled something, but the thick air and thin walls combined to make it unintelligible.

"I can smell her," said May. Both girls stared at the board. The marker moved over the letter R, then I, N, G, and came to a shuddering halt on S.

Melody's mouth dropped open. "She wants me to have the rings!"

May sniffed. All she could smell was sawdust and dry mold. "No," she said. "I think she wants you to put them back."

"She would have let me play with them," said Melody. She lifted her hands off the marker and held them up to the splinters of sun light that penetrated the roof. The gaudy rings sparked like distant stars.

"You moved it yourself," said May, quietly. Her fingers were still on the marker.

Melody made a sound, like a protest for being sent to bed too soon. "I did not!" Then, "Besides, *you* probably did. You wanted me to think I can't have my rings."

"They're not your rings," said May. She took her hands off the marker, slowly; the air seemed too thick to cut through. A crash of ceramic on tile split her ears.

Melody clenched her fingers into fists. "Let's play outside," she said. "I can't breathe up here."

"My eyes are burning," said May.

"That's because you don't have long, pretty lashes, like me," said Melody, putting on a pose.

The girls climbed down the ladder and closed up the attic behind them. Melody ran out the back door, and May went to clean up after her father, who said bad things about her mother because he thought no one was listening, and called them both names.

On Friday nights, May would go over to Melody's house, and Melody's father would cook them both dinner and let them watch too much TV. Melody's father was a quiet man, who had been almost silent since his wife died. He would bend over the stove like a ghost, and even his smiles seemed like whispers to May. The only thing she heard him say nowadays was, "Sweet dreams, princess," to his daughter when he left them to the television.

One night, during a commercial, Melody said, "I really am a princess, you know."

"No, you aren't," said May.

"I am so," said Melody. "It's why Harald likes me better than you. I think mom was the daughter of an island queen. We have a paper, somewhere, that says."

"You can't prove it," said May. Royalty was something in the blood, and she had seen Melody's blood in skinned knees and busted toes.

"Yes, I can," said Melody with a flat, wide grin. She put her finger to her mouth and beckoned for May to follow her. The light from the television set pale jewels on her cheeks and in her eyes, and she looked to May more like the ghost of a princess.

They snuck out the back door, propping the screen open with a pebble so they could get back in. Melody led the way across the back yard to the hole in the hedge between her house and May's. The ground there had been kicked away to bare dirt from years of use. The girls called it their secret passage, and still

believed it was.

May's father hadn't come home from the bar, yet. Melody dug for the spare key in the empty flower bed next to the back porch. "That's my job," said May. Melody shrugged and grinned again, but now there was so little light that she seemed not to have any jewels at all. She found the key and unlocked the door.

When May realized where they were going, she groaned. After their last time in the attic, her eyes had been stung red for hours. Her father had thought she had been crying. "Let's play a different game," she said.

"It's not a game," said Melody. "I thought you missed auntie." She stood on her tiptoes to reach a cord hanging down from the ceiling. She tugged on it and the hatchway to the attic fell open. A set of folded stairs swung out, barely missing May. This made Melody start to giggle again as she mounted the stairs.

May could already feel her face getting hot, before she even stepped on the bottom rung. "It's not funny," she hissed.

"It's not a game," said Melody.

They bumped their knees on boxes and rafters and finally were seated in the weary path of a moonbeam. May squinted at the board. "I can hardly see it," she said.

"Peasants have bad eyes," said Melody. "Now, concentrate."

The girls put their hands on the marker and waited. Nothing happened for a while, save that their breathing slowed. May could hear crickets outside; she counted their chirps and tried to remember how to divide the number to find the temperature. "How do they know?" she had once asked during a sleepover, as she and Melody were in a tent in Melody's back yard. "Magic," Melody had said. "Just like stars and medicine."

“Do we have to ask a question?” said May.

“Maybe,” said Melody. “But first we have to be in the right mood.” She cleared her throat. “Which of us are princesses?” she asked, bent over the moonbeam.

After a few seconds, the marker began to move. May hunched her neck to read what was being spelled out. B, said the board, O, T, H.

Melody gasped and put one bone-white hand to her lips. “Of course!” she said. “Our mothers were sisters!”

“Half-sisters,” said May.

“But as close as any sisters could be,” said Melody. “We are both princesses, and from now on we will tell everyone we meet.” She stood, upsetting the board as she did. She made what she thought was a curtsey. “In high school, when we go to homecoming and stuff, Harald will be so torn about which of us to dance with that he will rather die; and he won't be the only one!”

“Come on,” said May. “You moved it.”

“No, I didn't,” said Melody. She sniffed, regally. “If anyone did, it was you, because you knew you couldn't make me not be a princess, but you wanted to be one yourself.”

“They were half-sisters,” said May.

It was much cooler in the attic than it had been last time. It was almost pleasant, with the musk of age making everything seem of a different time, and somehow more royal. Melody sighed and crouched over to the wall. She peered out the cracks in the slat board. “You're such a baby when you want to be,” she said.

“I don't want to be,” protested May. “I'm sorry. I still miss mother. I don't remember her being a princess.”

“You shouldn't make it harder,” said Melody.

May came up beside her. “What are you looking

at?"

"See if you can find it," said Melody.

The two girls stared out into their back yards. A street lamp was giving off a bright buzz a couple blocks away. The sound put the girls in mind of the moths and bugs the light was attracting, like it was the largest of its own following.

"I don't see anything," said May. Melody didn't reply. May hated these moods of her cousin's. They happened when she didn't get her way. It was inevitable, like the eventual taste of Buckley's syrup May's dad would give her after the lesser discomfort of getting sick in the first place. "It's all ours, Melody Blake," said May. Penitence didn't taste so bad. "Princess number one. You're number one because you're older."

This made Melody chuckle lightly through her nose. "Yeah, princess May Bee Angler. What do you want to do with it?"

A pair of head lights swept across the lawn and hedges, throwing it all into wide relief. The car's engine growled into the driveway of May's house and spit nasty, formless words like her father stuck in a bad dream. "We could put my dad in handcuffs," said May.

"We could put his head on a pike," said Melody.

"We could put oil on him and then cover him in cotton balls. I saw that once," said May.

"We could laugh at him and throw tomatoes at him," said Melody.



It was almost freezing in the attic. Melody's father was out of town, and so the girls had been sleeping over in May's bedroom. It was Saturday, and May's father was sleeping off whatever he had done the previous night.

He had yelled at the girls when he got home earlier in the morning, told them to shut up or he'd figure out something new to punish them with. The house had gone silent; even the floorboards tried their hardest not to squeak. The girls had waited until he fell asleep, then they rushed to the attic and pulled the ladder up after them.

They could see their breaths when they exhaled. Melody was trying to make shapes, but they never held together. May was trying to stop a bloody nose with her fingers and sleeve.

"Why do you always get those?" asked Melody.

"Sometimes dad makes me sleep with the window open in my room. He says it gives someplace else for my racket to go. But it gets so dry when I'm breathing. I don't know." She sniffed and shivered. "This isn't helping any. It's too cold up here."

"I'm not going back downstairs," said Melody.

"Me, neither," said May. She made an unladylike snort, pulling back a wad of blood and phlegm. "Why did she marry him?" she asked.

"My mom used to say that yours married a man from the dark ages, because it was as close as she was going to get to a knight," said Melody. "A princess ought to have better."

"Your mum didn't want a knight?" asked May.

"She called my dad a knight in shining armor when he brought her soup when she was sick," said Melody.

"He's not a knight," said May. Her voice was bitter and new, a feeling she hadn't ever brought out loud before. "He's an ogre. He's got no magic in him, not like we do. Or if he does, it's black magic."

Melody smiled a little and said, "You've got some on your cheeks." May wiped a smear of blood off her cheek with her sleeve. Beneath them, a door slammed, and heavy feet stamped in the direction of the kitchen.

“What do we do, now?” asked May.

“I don't know,” said Melody. Her teeth chattered and she clenched her jaw to shut them up. “We could use the board again, if it would make you feel better.”

May didn't like the tone in her cousin's voice. It seemed to say that there was no magic in the world, black or otherwise — just games. “If it would make me feel better?” said May. “It was your idea in the first place.”

“I know,” said Melody. Then, “Fine. But you've got to trust me, this time, and stop yelling at me for moving it myself.”

“I never yelled at you,” said May.

Melody snorted. “Whatever.”

Suddenly the blood in May's nose and throat felt hot. “It's not like we should trust each other, anyway,” she spat. “I mean, we're family, right? Families don't mean anything, I don't think. They mean sleeping with the window open.”

“Fine,” said Melody. “Do you want to do this, or not?”

May remembered one summer, a couple of years past, when she had spent the night with Melody. May had woken up early, and hadn't been able to get back to sleep. She had that feeling in her gut, when it quakes with every breath, that felt to her like homesickness ought to. She had decided to sneak away, back to her own bed, but before she did, she had taken Melody's best doll with her. It wasn't something she had planned on doing; the opportunity just presented itself to her.

When Melody found out, the girls had stopped speaking for almost a week. May's mother had still been alive, then, and she had said, “You don't take toys away from your cousin.” May remembered that, now, and remembered what Melody's silence had been like. It had been the first time someone hadn't

accepted May's apology.

"Yeah," said May. "Maybe mom will have a good idea."

The marker was ice cold on their hands, but this time only Melody complained. She did so in a whisper, while May's father slammed cabinet drawers downstairs. "My royal skin," she said.

May glared at her — she had missed some of the blood and her lips looked like a Japanese girl's. "What do we do about the ogre, mother?" she asked the board, eyes still on her cousin.

The marker began to move. K, I, L. It stayed on the L.

Melody's mouth opened just wide enough for her tongue to slip out and wet her lips. "That's not funny," she said.

May just stared at her, expressionless. For a long moment, neither girl moved. "Put his head on a pike," said May.

"I want to go home," said Melody, pulling her hands away. "I'm tired of hiding up here. I'm cold." She stood up, as far as she could under the low roof. "I'm going home."

"It wasn't funny," said May.

"I'm going home," said Melody. She lowered the stairs as quietly as possible. May stretched out on the rough attic floor and listened to her cousin's foot steps slip to the backdoor. She heard her dad bellow, once, a deep and wordless question.



Then, it was all about lies. May went over to Melody's house the next day. Melody answered the door and said, "I'm sick today. I need to sleep. You woke me up." As May snuck back through the hedge, she heard the TV on in Melody's house and a giggle that did not

at all sound sick.

A couple of days later, Melody knocked at May's door because there was a carnival in town. "I'm grounded," said May. "I broke mother's picture."

"Good idea," said Melody. "That'll get him."

"It wasn't on purpose," said May.

That night, Melody came back from the carnival with a huge grin and a stuffed bear. "Guess who won this for me," she said when May answered the door.

"I'm still grounded," said May.

"Who cares? Is your dad home?" asked Melody.

"No," said May. She stepped aside, a small shuffle of her feet so Melody could come in. She saw that Melody was wearing a couple of the rings she had taken from the attic.

"Okay, now guess," said Melody. She held up the stuffed bear and danced it back and forth in front of May's face.

"Your dad," said May.

"Harald!" Melody squealed, almost at the same time. Then she repeated it, in case May hadn't heard. "Harald, and he gave it to me with Becca and Janie standing right there."

"They only cost a couple bucks at the store," said May.

"He's going to ask me out. I know it!" said Melody. She leaned in close, and May could smell the carnival stuck in her hair and the fur of the bear, all cotton candy and dust. "Let's find out when," whispered Melody.

"I'm tired," said May. Nevertheless, she found herself pulling down the attic stairs and holding them while Melody ascended.

"He grounds you and then leaves you home?" said Melody from out of sight as May climbed the ladder.

"Yeah," said May.

It was near-dark in the attic. The distant flashing of the carnival penetrated the cracks in the walls like probing fingers. Melody already had the board out and ready. May sat down across from her.

“Ready?” asked Melody. Her face was screwed up in false concentration, but she was having trouble holding back a giggle.

The girls set their fingers on the marker. Melody opened her mouth to speak, but May got there first. “Mother, I can't live here anymore.” She closed her eyes. After a few seconds, she opened them. Melody was staring at her.

“That was my turn,” she hissed.

“Oh, God, Melody!” cried May. “You've won every game we've played since we were three. You want to ask our dead mothers if they can tell when a boy's going to kiss you, and you're going to make up the answer, anyway.”

“I'm not going to make up the answer,” said Melody. She looked more hurt than angry. Her brows bent toward her eyes, and for a moment May caught the shine of wetness, though whether it was from tears or a natural humor she couldn't tell.

“I'm sorry,” said May. Envy drove the apology, and it may have been a lie. Melody had always slotted right into the small society of childhood much better than May had been able. Melody had joined the boy's team in kindergarten, and had vouched for May's ability to make dirt clods. Melody had gotten herself transferred out of the hard math class; she had taken pity on May and brought her down, too, so they wouldn't have to work so hard, so they could pass notes. It was Melody who had decided that the girls would be the maids of honor for each other's weddings, and didn't even tease May by humming the bridal march.

The marker moved across the board, producing a

sound like a cricket's wings. It hovered over the O, then the G, R, E. "I know what it is," said Melody, just high enough above a whisper to carry an emotion. "It's auntie — her ghost can't rest until you're out of the ogre's lair."

"I know," said May. She closed her eyes again. The marker was cold underneath her fingers. She could feel the tendons between her knuckles quaking, as though fighting a motion. Something warm spread across them. She opened her eyes and saw them Melody was holding her hands.

"What can we do?" asked Melody.

"We have to talk to someone," said May. "I don't think a princess gets to fight the beast. She needs a knight."

"She doesn't," said Melody. "She needs a sister."

"But we don't have anything to say," said May. "Lots of dads ground their daughters. Lots of them yell. Your dad got drunk on auntie's birthday last year, and he threw a bottle at the wall."

"Then we have to lie," said Melody. She squeezed her cousin's hands. The game was back in her eyes; they sparkled like the stolen rings on her fingers. "We have to pick the right one."



On the next school day, they went to talk with Mr. Gregory, the counselor. They held hands as they sat on a thin gray couch. Melody didn't say much, except to protest when Mr. Gregory asked to be left alone with May. The girls were allowed to stay together. May spoke to the carpet; her lies were cruel and light enough to fly to Mr. Gregory's ears.

That night, May slept over in Melody's room. They talked about little things, their conversation in the pitch black as weightless as the lies had been.

Around midnight, the doorbell rang. The girls listened to Melody's father answer it. There was a muttered question that didn't make it all the way through the walls, then something louder that didn't have words. The door slammed shut. After a few moments, Melody's father rapped on the door jamb.

"Come in," said Melody.

There was a long silence. May began to wonder if her uncle hadn't passed on to his bedroom when she heard him clear his throat. "Sweet dreams, girls," he breathed from a shadow.

"Good night, daddy," said Melody.

Their easy chat disrupted, the girls lay on their backs, staring at the ceiling. After a while, May said, "I'm hot. Can I open the window?"

"Mm," said Melody, from somewhere near sleep. A slice of moonbeam fell across her face, blended with the hot white of a street lamp.

May kicked off her blankets and went to the window. She slid it open and propped it there with an old piece of broken twig. The crickets were out in concert. The air smelled of beer and soil, of old things and dead things and things that have been alive forever. There was nothing so brief as the scent of laundry out on a line, or the light breeze of a modest perfume.

It was a short drop to the dewy grass. May's feet froze in an instant, but she didn't turn back. She made for their secret passage, and brushed her fingers along the hedge. The leaves brushed against each other and produced a sound like labored breathing.

There was a light on in her kitchen. She watched from the lawn. Her father's silhouette passed to and fro in front of the window. May took a step forward, darkly satisfied that if he stepped to the window to peer out, he would only be able to see his own reflection.

After a while, his restlessness ceased; he ate leftovers from the fridge and went to bed. May waited until her feet went numb, and then crept to the back door. She let herself in. The long hallway to her father's room seemed to pulse with his snoring, a sound like blood clotting in lungs. The air was thick with settled life, with odors that will not move with the stirring of air. May's breath came shallow. The bedroom door was ajar. She rested her palm against it and let her weight carry it silently open. The bedside lamp was on its lowest setting.

Her father lay on his back, his mouth open. In the dim light, she could see his tongue plastered to the roof of his mouth. It pulsed like a slug with each breath he took. His wide, flat nose was red with burst capillaries and untreated acne. May had never seen her parents' wedding pictures; she didn't even know if there were any. From a different angle, from a distance, wrapped in a tuxedo, would he have looked any more like a prince?

His hair was the same color as hers. His lashes were stubby, like hers. She was the daughter of an ogre, and the child of a ghost. A princess is needy, she thought. A princess needs two pairs of hands to play her games. She felt common blood rushing in her ears as she took another step toward her sleeping father. He grunted, wordless, and rolled toward the light. His eyelids squinted, then fluttered open.

May reached down and switched off the lamp.

DEAD GENERATION

ONE

Art isn't happy yet, but he's getting close.

"I'm going over to Marionette's, Mom."

"Don't you have school today?"

"It's an optional day."

"Are you sure? I don't want you to get in trouble.

You remember that time your father and I played hooky just to go to the symphony concert."

Wince. "Yes, I remember. And yes, I'm sure." He draws out the *yeses* like taffy, soft spider web strands that snap on a second.

"Well, all right then. Have fun. Be safe."

Marionette lives in a mirror, right across the road. Her parents' garage with its space for one car and one moped, the door that leads into the kitchen, all identical to Art's. It always throws a pill of something

unsettling into his stomach to cross the street. The space of Marionette's garage is the same as his own, but its occupants are different. The moped is a brushed-down chrome, instead of red. The car is a newer model. The bucket of old golf balls is missing, along with the set of clubs crusted with skeleton blades of grass. The strange sameness is offensive, but quiet.

Art doesn't ever bother knocking. He pushes open the wooden door with its comfortable squeak; he kicks off his shoes and calls,

“Mari, dahling!”

“Down here!” floats the muffled welcome from the basement. Art was already on his way down.

Marionette is sprawled on a couch, a thick textbook draped over her face.

“Sleeping again? You remember what happens to the sloths, my dear.” Art drops into the few open square inches of cushion, his skinny body too light to catapult Marionette very much. She groans anyway.

“I don't want to do this.” She pulls the book to just the horizon of her eyes and impales Art with a glare. He grins, puts his hands behind his head and stretches like a street mime.

“You're already finished with this, aren't you, Arthur?” He nods and she pulls the book back into eclipse. “I know, I know—” she chides herself before he can say anything. “You're right. I remember.”

“How much do you have left?”

“Just a few more paragraphs.”

“So, you're just complaining for the principle?”

She curls up into a ball and whimpers without heart. The book slides off her face and lands like a dying bird, all desperate, fluttering wings. Art slaps her on the butt.

She whirls her head around. Her face is blank. She gathers her lower lip under her teeth and chews

on her small silver piercing, slightly off-center. She does that when she's worried. Art reddens; he pulls his hand away and cages it in the fingers of his other. A memory, like a voice, sprawls across the forefront of his thought.

A brief casual touch between his parents, a little hormone hope is all it took to set the heart beats fluttering. One impulse acted on, one mistake made too quickly to believe. Propriety forgotten in the stillness of a house to themselves. Soft blankets, warm sheets, the focus of all energy to the center, the middle, the connection and the struggle to keep it. Then the falling away, the parting, preserving the seed that would be Art, and his mother's voice saying, My god what have we done; all so much, only took a single touch to start it.

Art leans into the armrest of the couch, forcing its blunt dagger into his ribs to keep him in the present. He doesn't like the way his skin oozes a thin film of sweat when the implanted memories make their way to the forefront, so they have performed to their design.

"Why don't you draw while I finish?" Marionette suggests, from her own haze. "I haven't seen an Arthur original for a while."

"No, not for a bit. Not until later. I have a surprise."

"Oh, really? What is it?"

"A picture that won't suck."

"Oh, come on. Your art does not suck."

"Yeah, it really does."

Marionette hides her inner dialogue in picking up her book and fidgeting with the ring in her lip. Should she agree, as a joke, as the truth? Does she deny it, but not really? There is a brimming wastepaper bin upstairs in her virgin room, full of his gifts, and she can't show it to Art, because it would break his mind,

a little or a lot; she doesn't know which and won't find out.

“Okay. You win. They suck.”

“But I've got a way around that.”

“What? How?”

“Later.”

She doesn't hear the tinny seriousness that usually masterminds his self-deprecation. He is smiling, and he means it, as much as he can.

His hands are very still. On every other day, they are dancing with anticipation, fidgeting for images to trickle down their sides and onto paper. Marionette notes the stillness, wrinkles an eyebrow. She opens her mouth to say something, but stops herself when she sees the words her brain prepared:

“You aren't annoying me as much as usual. Whatever is the matter?” She should thank god for the unlikely peace, not pick at the crumpled thread that anchors it. She slides back into her book. Art watches her eyes track back and forth, the movement mirrored and reduced in his own.

“Why do we have to learn this crap?”

“You know.”

“I mean, why didn't they just give us the knowledge along with everything else?”

She gasps, but doesn't mean it. “Why, Arthur, that's blasphemy! My dad keeps a gallon or two of dish-soap in the guest bathroom. Go gargle some and let me read.”

Art remembers years ago when he first heard how to build new worlds of memories and knowledge in the human brain. Sweat over nano-scopes had produced the papers, the journals, the thoughts that astonished the nation. A group of four families had seized upon the notion of implanting old memories in new tissue. They had gone on to form the Jerusalem Hope Community, the straight shot street with its

reflected houses, and its small, reflected people. A strict ban had been placed on—and these are his parents thoughts, Art realizes—unsanctioned augmentation. There would be no messing about in the children's brains beyond what was prescribed. There would be no police in the community, but everyone would look out for his own family and neighbors, as good citizens should. Nothing bad could happen. Each person's toil would be his own and all of their mistakes would disappear in a single generation. Thanks mom, thanks dad.

The front doorbell rings. Marionette's dad calls out like an ogre, "I'll get it!" uncontested. Art can hear his footsteps trace a dotted line across the ceiling. The door latch rattles. Muffled words with a gentleman tone. The door closes.

"It's for you, Mari!"

Two Morse code trails, now, one to the study, one to the basement stairs. Art glances up. "Charlie-Man. What's going on?"

"Not a lot, Art. With you?"

"Just waiting for the mail."

Charlie-Man doesn't care, obviously. The moment he saw Marionette, his smile became a heat lamp, blatant and intentionally so. His words carry the timber of distraction, building a polite store-front to hold Art at bay. So Art isn't surprised when he doesn't ask, "Waiting for what?" but, instead, "Mari. Would you like to go to the movies with me?"

She looks up, abandoning the homework's last straggling sentences. "Could you bring me home later?"

"I'll drive you myself."

Art stands up first, Marionette a moment after. Her face is clouded red; not cinnamon like her hair, but rusted iron. Charlie-Man holds down an elegant arm for her.

“I’ll just hang out here a while, if that’s okay,” says Art. He used to spend long afternoons down here in the basement, playing house and divorce with Marionette. He didn’t want to go home, because his mom would ask questions, a momentary presence in his life.

Marionette has pushed away whatever pain or thrill had blushed her cheeks and is blessed neutral again. “Yeah, that’s fine, Arthur. We’ll see you later.”

He wilts back down onto the couch; listens to their dotted lines. He stares up at the ceiling, painted a boring flat white. No cracks of ugliness and beauty to fight and dance with each other. He saw the bare paint as another reflection, staring back, but not for long. He smiles at the thought, and wider at the one just behind it: his smile will mean so much more, just a short time from now.

“Whatcha smiling about there, Arthur?”

Marionette’s dad is leaning over the railing, all looming and paternal. He insists on being called Mister Palsy, and tells you as though it’s a privilege for you to do so. Art can’t decide between sitting up straight or slouching down further.

“Hi. Just thinking.”

“A noble way to pass the time, young master. What about?” He tries too hard to hit each demographic, thinks Art. Far too hard to deserve anything more than—

“Just remembering.”

Palsy’s teeth are large, boxy. He’s incapable of hiding his emotions. Art suspects that those monolith chompers actually expand when the man is happy, jacking the gash of a mouth wider and wider. He understands why the Palsys have only one child. What he must look like during orgasm. A panting jack-o’-lantern.

He is coming down the stairs. "They take off and leave you again?"

"It's cool. I could use a little peace and quiet, actually."

Mister Palsy falls onto the couch, hamming it up. He exhales, whistling air between his teeth. Art is surprised they don't hum like oboe reeds.

"Optional day at school?"

"Yeah. Exam reviews in math and sport."

"What about that painting class?"

"Just touch-up work if you feel like it."

"And you're all finished? To your satisfaction?" He pulls on satisfaction, testing the limit of the word.

Art grimaces. "For now." He hasn't even started on the piece, yet. He has been deferring, citing a lack of inspiration. His instructor has been satisfied to let him spend the period grading papers and keeping the clutter off the workbenches. He knows it won't take him long, once he *remembers* what to paint.

A rumble passes by outside. For a single beat, Art's heart leaps. But the rumble passes on without stopping. It's just Mister Ruffs in his grocery truck, the same goddamn make as the postman's.

"Y'know," says Palsy carelessly. "I watched a documentary about that Gregor Long fellow on the TV last night. All about the Tudor portraits. He just finished the line, you know? Fascinating stuff." He pronounces the *C* in fascinating. He does it to be funny, and Art smiles; he is a fine upstanding young lad of the community. "It would be some thing to have his memories. Do you know how much time he spends every day doing his sketching and stuff?"

"No, sir."

"Sure? Want to hazard a guess?"

"Hundreds of hours, Mister Mayor."

"Palsy son, I said call me Palsy. Anyway, you're a bit low. He's logged thousands. I forget how many. No biggie. His wrists must be pretty sore."

No convenient rumble, this time. Just pure, spiked silence. Art knows exactly how many hours Long spent pulling at his brain and splashing it down on canvas in pigment and ink. So many, and they can be compressed with diamond-forming strength into a pill the size of an aspirin, in a box the size of your fist. Art has paid for each of those hours with his life savings.

"You ever drink, Arthur?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Good man. That stuff will cause you problems."

"I remember, sir," says Art. The generation gap widens by Mister Palsy's six feet, and Art's five-foot-eight. Palsy slaps both palms down on his knees and grins his boxy grin. He reaches over and slugs Art in the shoulder joint. It is going to bruise.

"You keep away from that stuff, y'hear?"

"*Ya hair*," says Art under his breath. "Yes, sir," above it. Mister Palsy stomps up the stairs, humming the theme from *Gilligan's Island*. Even though he hates the song, Art is glad for it, if only because it is fading now, and quiet around the corners; gone.

Art stretches out on the couch. He looks at the blank ceiling and imagines he can see pictures, forming themselves out of nothing as if from a sky overcast with steely clouds. There is nothing there, of course, nothing he can see; but Gregor Long would. He's sure of it.

With that pill in his hand, down his throat, he'll finally know. The black market bots reconstructing blocks of his brain, broad strokes of thoughts that do not belong, not by any god- or mother-given right.

Rebellion isn't easy. Art is trying. Just the fact that the pill is contraband makes him feel accomplished.

He managed it, the first step, the hardest step. Now he just has to tuck head under wings and roll the rest of the way.

The ground rumbles, pauses, rumbles—the signature of the mail truck. Art leaps to his feet and shoots up the stairs, miscounting and stubbing his toe on the last. He leaves through the front door and doesn't quite throw it shut. Behind him, Mister Palsy uses a gentle hand to settle the latch. He carries his body much kinder, now, as though his discomfort in the basement was an act, or this is. He steps to a window. Across the street, Art has already disappeared into his house. His mother is probably holding a small stack of letters, bills, and one discreetly-wrapped package.

Palsy pulls a phone from his pocket and dials. His other hand lifts an ad he had torn from one of his daughter's magazines. A pretty picture says that for just this low, low price, you too can be the proud owner of six hundred combined years of art history and experience. Gregor Long's name is the highest, brightest reference.

“Hello, Mrs. Samed? Did you receive a package today? You did? Oh, just a hunch.” He can hear Art in the background, excited and alive. “Listen, Mrs. Samed: I don't want you to give it to him. You did? Damn. I'm going to call Butch and Carter. No, I don't think it's dangerous. Not to you, anyway. Please trust me on this.”

He hangs up, curses the Sameds for not planning well enough into the future, or for not living these problems in their own guinea-pig lives. He dials the phone again, says only a very few words, because they taste so much like failure.

The sign says *Sanitarium* in sterile black on white. Its isolation reprimands are free of charge; time is the great pro-bono healer, says the charter of Jerusalem Hope. The rooms have padded floors, all that could be afforded. The walls are gray stone, quarried from the lowest bidder.

Art lies curled on his side. His eyes are close to the wall, close to his hand, in which he holds a paperclip slid off the file that declared him reprobate. He scratches at the soft stone. This close, this dim, the colors seem the same, the scratches useless for counting days, leaving notes, or anything more than the solitary sound that livens the room only a little.

Sitting back, he sees the empty shades of gray lace themselves together; deep gradients build an image of beauty, of a girl with a tiny ring through her lip. The cuts are so shallow they'll probably be smudged away the next time the janitor scrubs the walls.

The careful hands will hope and make them again. He's happy, you bastards. He's happy.

TWO

No one ever has sex in Jerusalem Hope before the age of twenty-five. The meme police see to that. I mean, lovingly, my parents. Not just my parents. All of our parents. Each a little cog of a great moral spindle, twisted by the Atlas hands of Mister Palsy, who thinks that god's behind it all.

The idea was originally to make sure that what comes out of this whole inflamed, news-media smorgasbord of a colony are well adjusted young citizens with keen moral senses and characters strong enough to break a bank over. No telling if that's going to happen or not. Kevin was the oldest of us all, but

without him, it'll be at least another two years before anyone else hits that magic age, the quarter century. I think that Sophie is coming up next. I won't go for another four years. If they let me go.

See, the thing is that Palsy has gotten his little cult so tightly wrapped around the concept, and the dreadful banal mall with its stupefying movies, that I don't think anyone will want to leave. Arthur, maybe.

No, that's not it. The gates will open soon enough, and this great, evolving project will shit out its first fruit. But they're not going to let me go. Not out of this soulless house, not into the gray and sooty landscape outside the fences.

I shouldn't think like this.



Kate and Doug stand in a line with all the other Hoppers, back against nothing but the wide, undeveloped land that Palsy calls Jerusalem. A simple chain-link fence nets their vision, neatly capturing the view of the city outside in its metal web.

"You understand, of course, that in order for the memories to be real, to be honest when you pass them on, we have to put you through this."

Each head down the row nods. Kate and Doug build the firmest foundation of agreement, of obedience to the great and noble good; a good that can somehow stand on pillars of shuddering skulls.

A small grimace from Palsy and the parents charge the fence. They hold out their hands, as though warding away a band of muggers. It's a motion they will only make this once. They grip the fence. It's electrified. Their muscles clamp, cementing each hold. Waves of pain jolt through them at the speed of light.

They'll never do that again.



My parents were the best of the lot. The rotting cream of the crop. They'd never really done anything wrong on their own. Nothing worth remembering, worth passing on to me. Maybe they snuck away from their parents, back in the nineties when the STDs were as numerous as the positions to exchange them. Maybe they went out into the forest at night, and my dad felt my mom up, and warmed his hands where he shouldn't have—

I can't do this. It fucking scares me that I can't. I mean it. I don't swear unless I'm serious.

I don't think they thought very much. They obviously don't now, reclining on their cushions like they deserve their rest after their long, hard days of government subsidized beautifying of their precious, precious town.

Look at this, this sink. Some of the blood is dry, out of the path of the water. The rest has long since been washed away.

Grow down, now, little Charlie-Man, ignore the rumbling temptation and the way it feels to slide the knife under skin, that exquisite thrill of the paper cut, the way skin folds, then dries and drops off, useless now and let go—

I can't. I can't.



The white little room holds the stillness of a life in balance. Kate and Doug have been talking, have been listing off the pros and cons. Kate mentions a childhood hope, the words lilting out of her mouth like a strange sonnet. She talks about her older sisters, and how the chances in life were all laid out before them; their only weighty tasks to pick and choose. By the time Kate came along, she was destined to a state school, a hopeful marriage, and trust in the future under a President who did nothing to foster his children.

Doug matches her story for story, sitting hunched over the terminal, his face glowing a little in the dying phosphors from the display. He whispers about bloodlines and honor, a son to bear his name.

Their stories spool to a halt. Their eyes lock. Kate nods, as if the decision was up to her. And, probably, it was. Doug turns to the computer, knowing full well what stones he is placing on his son's embryonic shoulders.

Gacy, Dahmer, Manson; America built a legacy around their mysterious hatred. The footprints that they left were pitifully filled by little copycats who nevertheless took their turns in shadowed lights and ended human lives. It doesn't matter who. No one could live with those memories and not value human life; the beauty, the frailty.

Kate and Doug don't want to go too far. They stop before Manson.



I've never done anything wrong. I don't know what my parents were so afraid of. It's not like this sterile, tiny little world offers a lot of temptations. Sure, we could skip school, or make out in the theater, or get in a fight over a girl; but those don't scar a man for life. They won't scar any of us. We already know how shameful all of that is. We understand, because our parents went through each step for us.

Don't you see? They broke our pasts. They gave us nothing to build on. They gave us histories without books; their apologetic grins, remembering how it feels to be slapped by a girl and berated by her parents, to make a mistake in accounting and owe your boss half your paycheck, to make a promise and break it because time just doesn't stretch far enough, to get too close to a cow's rear legs and suffer the results: mud and bruises.

I can look down and rub my chest, see exactly where the hoof was planted, and know that my body is perfectly intact. I snuck in to look at my dad once when he was taking a shower. His skin and bones have healed so as you wouldn't notice if you didn't already remember. When he turned his face out of the water, streams running down his chest, I could see the little depression. A valley of stupidity, a mistake he won't repeat again soon. And neither will I.



The birth was slow and painful, at least until Kate requested the spinal tap. She collapsed in a wilted heap, her hand sliding out of Doug's. His grimace disfigured the paper mask that covered nose and mouth. The baby came out with a caul over his head. A superstitious nurse made the sign of the cross, and the doctor slapped her to get her moving.

Charlie-Man's first three hours were hell. His heart wasn't working quite right. He was taken from his parents and locked away in an incubator for observation. The whole time he was gone, they stared at their hands, thinking somehow that they were at fault, that the patterns they impressed on their son would drive him into the grave before he could understand the goodness of his parents' intention, before he could even think.

He proved a strong child. Those three hours of pure, lung-stretched screaming convinced everyone important that the heart was normal, the physiology intact.

When Kate first held Charlie-Man to peace, snuggled against her swollen breast, she saw something in his eyes that looked like hatred. She imagined it.



I'm supposed to be the lawyer. Some committee decided. That means that, except for Freya the future physician, I have the longest road of study among my

peers. Piles of books and thoughts and cases and idealistic remnants of America's birthday. I have to slog through them all with a grin for my parents.

I don't really have to grin. I don't. They know I don't. They wonder if they made a mistake.

We have another lawyer in town. I'm supposed to replace him, once he gets too old to think straight and once I'm not so cocky. It would have been easy to take the shape of his thoughts, the cases he's won and lost, and graft them into me. It's much easier with a living man than a dead one. But no, I get to study every day, wearing out my carpal tunnel flipping pages of books that nobody had the decency to transcribe onto computer.

Yes, I'm bitter about this. I've had my past enhanced and my future stunted, and it pisses me off. It pisses me off. I'm going to do something.



They sometimes worry that they went too far. Like on that Halloween when Charlie-Man was six years old. He didn't come down to go trick-or-treating, so Doug came hunting for him, howling like a ghost, while Kate screamed in her best slasher victim.

When Doug opened the door, Charlie was curled up like a broken egg. His eyes and mouth were wide and white. The blood had drained from his face. Doug thought he was having a stroke or a seizure. It took several tries to get Kate to stop screaming, and she laughed until she heard the urgency in Doug's voice and came upstairs herself.

The hospital didn't do anything for their son. There was nothing they could do. He wasn't sick, he was just in a state of shock. He calmed down after a while in the presence of a doting Mother and gentle Father.

When he was still enough to speak, they asked him—dripping with curiosity over care—what had he seen?

"A little man. He didn't like me."

Young Thomassen said that such aggravations were uncommon, but not entirely unexpected. It's difficult to know what those small brains will make of the large minds they are trying to grasp.

"What could have triggered it, do you think?"

They didn't tell Thomassen. Kate dissolved into hysterics from time to time over the next week, then got over it.



I lied before.

I took Marionette out to the movies yesterday. We watched *Passive Aggressive*. I'd seen it before, but it was a good chance to spend some time with her. That Arthur was there when I came to pick her up was an extra bonus. I hate that kid's haircut, and his passivity. I just want to slap him in the face and leave it at that. Let him figure it out. I could walk away.

Mari spends too much time at the mall. She has memorized a path past the art galleries, bookstores, the freelancers who buy their precious sale time in hours and, once their licenses expire, are never let back in. She makes her way through the tech shops without a second glance. I made sure to watch her eyes, this last time. She doesn't even need them, it's all so familiar. The block-wide coming attraction advertisements were shining in her eyes. Eyes are the only reflective part of the body. It made me very sad to see all that vivid light and action staring out of her.

And you know what? It fucking made me want to watch a movie.

I don't remember much of the plot, even after seeing twice. When it was over, I felt the red thoughts clamoring at the back of my mind, as though they knew I was done being brainless and that made it their

turn. I took Marionette home. I said good-night to old Palsy.

It took so long to find the right one. He was eight, and he had the same brown hair, the same blue eyes. He didn't have the glasses, but that wouldn't take much to fix. Glasses are medical, like marijuana. Easy to get hold of.

We watched a movie at his house. He was in line to be a postman—no, he was just a kid. Just a kid in glasses.

He wasn't strong. I was strong.



Bedtime. They should feel pride, every single day. When they crawl under covers, they should be proud because their son, their fine handsome Charlie, didn't do anything wrong. And it's all because of their foresight.

A lot of people don't do anything wrong. It gets a little old. Not a precious new smile, but the one you've had to stare at every night across the dinner table for twenty years or so. Not the new feeling, the cold flowing out from her center and the small pants, the special breath and moan that only Doug's ears have heard; it's old, now. He's heard every sound she makes. She doesn't bother to make them much anymore.

They undress facing away from each other. It's a routine. The bed is soft and warm and comfortable like the skin of Doug's chest. Now she rests her head on a pillow; he drapes an arm over her waist.

Sleep makes them deaf. They wake up deaf. Charlie-Man makes them breakfast, because they have to go to work before he has to be at the tutor's. He smiles to them and they smile back, but pride has gotten old.



I'm leaving this to say it's not my fault. My hands are. My thoughts aren't. You can't damn me to hell for what I can't stop. No more than you can damn a depressive for enjoying a rainy day. This isn't my fault.

You'll forget that, when you find me. I can hear the rush of blood past your eardrums now, your excitement. You wouldn't call it that.

This is my fault: the chisel in the cracks. I'm so much stronger than any of you. I can resist my past because it's not mine. I can live it. Forget it. I can hold onto the fence, climb over those brainwashed wires. I am so much stronger than what doesn't exist.

My clothes still smell like her perfume.

I need to take a shower.

A knife.

THREE

Marionette balks and backs her shaking hand away.

"I can't do it. I can't do it. I don't know how to do it."

"You just press here; press here, god damn it!" She has never heard her dad swear like that, not in front of other people, not even in front of the television. She wobbles forward again and puts out both of her hands, popping the wrists. Of course she wants to be helpful and *let me go back to the basement*. Of course she wants to be helpful.

"Press! Honey, everything you've got."

"It'll get on me—"

"Do it now!" He roars at her on past the words and a little life finally makes it to her fingers, though they remain cold. She kneels in the dirt, feels a stick poke into the gap under her knee cap. Blood is muddying everything up. Her dad is shaking a rag at

her, saying, Take it take it take it. Maybe only once but god it echoes. She takes it, she puts it to the kid's neck and presses.

"But I'm going to choke him," she says. Maybe the kid hears. His glasses are still on. After everything, he's still got his glasses on; they're bent and one of the wings is stabbing into his ear. She uses her free hand to ease them off his face. He opens his eyes as she tugs; the lids flutter a moment at full wide and then drop closed again.

A crowd has gathered. Mister Palsy is among them with his arms all the way up to the thunder storm, crying for the men to follow him. While Marionette kneels in the gore, crushing the boy's Adam's apple, the bodies flow past until only the women are left, looking at each other and mouthing, Remember when. Charlie-Man's dad must be feeling sick because he's still here and he's kneeling down, too, just across the body. His hands are big and warm and he says,

"No, honey, you're pressing too hard. Here, let me."

Larger than her mouth, a sob breaks out. "Dad is gonna kill him."

Charlie-Man's dad shakes his head and dabs at the boy's cheeks with his shirt cuff. He leaves dirt and takes away sweat. "No, they won't kill him. You remember what happened to the boy who cried, Wolf."

She doesn't respond. The women are moving away. The rain is letting up. She tastes her hair and runs both her hands through it to slick it back into place. Knots catch over her fingers and she feels something like a paper cut on one knuckle. The kid is so white he glows.

"Where are his parents," she wonders, her hands still clasped around her head, holding it on.

“They left us.”

“Nobody leaves.”

“No. Nobody leaves.”



He had called her right before he got the kid. Was he watching. Was he calling from his cell phone. Watching the kid alone in his allocation, making his dinner in the microwave and pouring a glass of milk. Ring ring, Hello? Hey, Mari. I can smell you from here. You smell like my mom. She did this to me; she and that bitch of a bastard she calls my dad. I don't smell like him, never have never will. Can you smell it, Mari? It's going to rain.

She hung up and he called her right back, the receiver barely resting in its cradle, as though he knew she was going to cut him off. You can hang up on me whenever you want, he hissed and it sounded like a threat. Did he hold the glasses then. Maybe he had them in his pocket. That's how they bent. Not when he beat the knife butt against the side of the kid's paper head.

Charlie, what are you doing tonight. Do you want to go to a movie?

We always go to movies.

I like the movies.

Because there's a script. Because the script gets into your head. I've seen you, in the dark, mouthing the words before the actors say them. I can smell the theater on you; buttered popcorn and hot spindles. You haven't got a thought in your head that you sat down and wrote yourself.

He seemed about to say more, but then the rain started; she could hear the drops falling into the mouthpiece, scratching and fizzling. She asked him if he wanted to come over, told him that they could talk,

they could talk about whatever or whenever he wanted. He didn't answer. Then he was coughing, big crazy lung shudders, and that was the last she heard until the crash of breaking glass and something that might have been a crack of lightning or a frightened owl. It was over too quickly for her to be sure.

She only heard that much because she wasn't screaming, *Charlie Charlie come back to me.*

The fence around Jerusalem Hope is twelve feet tall; not hard to climb, but nobody tries. The rain and lightning make it sparkle in the dark, sometimes seeming to crawl with the burning electricity that Charlie-Man remembers from his mother and his father, sometimes not there at all.

He is hiding in the bushes, twenty feet away from freedom. He knows that if he runs hard enough, he could break through the mesh and curl up with the aftershocks on the other side. He is wrong. The bound alloy that makes up the links is as tough as a spider web scaled up, tougher than steel, than Charlie-Man himself.

The rain has washed away all of the blood from his face and neck where it squirted when he cut the boy's artery. His clothes are still messy, and the water is setting the stains even tighter in the fabric. It would never wash out, but Charlie-Man can go without a shirt. He is young and designed and the cold will be delicious on his skin. His hair slops across his forehead, stabbing his eyes in the gusts of wind, stinging his temples where it whips. Everything is absolutely perfect.

Everything is pushing past him; he's making the wind on his own. God damn god damn, mutter his feet squishing heavily through the sod and down to

the loam. It's like walking on crusted snow. Of course when you plant your feet you're going to break the ice and get the powder in your shoes. Of course the dirt will cling to you. He's moving faster and faster, hearing nothing behind him but the storm, lightning crackling like from synapse to synapse across the sky. The storm remembers how it feels to be the first, to be the background for amino acids as they wound together and created a race with a concept of hell. It felt just like this; I swear it.

He loosens every muscle, every bone, for the blast of electricity. It doesn't come. He hits the fence and it throws him off. Sprawled on his back in the mud, he suddenly starts to laugh, holding his mouth open while it fills up with rain. Of course it would cost a fortune to maintain that draw on their energy grid. Of course the bastards had it in them all this time.

His shirt is worthless and he pulls it off, kneeling on the ground to rub it in the dirt for no reason, stains upon stains. He stands and throws up his arms, free already. He poses like one crucified and wonders idly why it feels the most victorious pose. Hit me with your best shot but of course you can't.

His spine shudders as he climbs, up and over. Some primal thing expects the sharp report of a gun, or maybe the silent shock of a spear. Nothing comes. He drops to the other side, sinking into the dirt up to his ankles. He takes his shoes off and runs.



Marionette listens to the crashes and the roars. Mister Palsy came home with empty clenched hands. She stayed in her room, watching movies on her computer with the sound turned off. She heard him shout his claim of rationality at mom and she heard a splintering

that went on long after the impact. Maybe the thunder blew down one of the willows in the front yard.

She stays in her room until the front door slams open and shut, first denting the wall, then shuddering the frame.

In the living room, her mom is crying and bruised and patient. Mari sits down on the couch next to her.

“It'll be okay, mom.”

Her mom nods and bites her lower lip until there is blood or perhaps there already was blood. She bites herself a lot.

“Do you remember when my dad took me to college, Mari? And when we went out to eat lunch and I saw Phil eating and laughing with his parents and I said to my dad, I want to marry him. And my dad grinned. And when the waiter left I said to my dad, I want to marry him, too. And your grandpa wasn't worried at all. Do you remember that?”

“No, Mom. I don't.”



“You have five minutes, young lady.”

Mister Palsy hadn't seen her go. She had left before the sun was up and shut the door behind her with nothing louder than a clicking latch. The fence was down. The moon was down. There was one place she had to go before she put this all in her past.

“Five minutes.” The orderly slides open the door for her. She steps in and drops her mouth. She sees herself, carved so gently into the wall. She touches her face. The orderly clears his throat twice, then says, You're in the way. Marionette takes a step forward and the door closes behind her.

Art is on his bed, face right up against her pictured neck. She hears a scratching sound.

“Arthur? Hey?”

He rolls over and his eyes dim.

“Mari. Do you remember me.”

“Hi Arthur.” She sits down on the toilet and crosses her legs. She is wearing a short brown business skirt and a home made tee. Art watches the ripples in her fabric.

He burned his brain. Black market memories, the nanotechnology. It broke him all the way and she can see it. His eyes always moved a lot, pulling in the details of the world that he couldn't draw, but now they move without stopping, as though they were blurring it all, trying to fit everything into one picture.

“I just wanted to stop in and tell you. I'm taking off. I'm going to the city. I'm going to find some work.”

“I think I'll stay here, if that's all right with you,” Art says. His voice is like a child's, full of wonder and wondering and not exactly certain that he's saying what he wants to mean.

“Hey. Yeah. That's fine, Arthur.” She reaches out a hand for him.

He rolls his face against the wall. She hears the scratching resume. She stands up and clicks over to the door; her shoes make a wonderful sound. The orderly answers her knock.

“Done already?”

“Thanks,” she says as he opens the door.

The storm has cleared up the sky; it's wider than ever. She walks toward the edge of town. The guard on duty might have some words, but what can they mean. I remember the night that Charlie-Man killed the past. She will always remember how her dad looked, screaming at the men, his gash of a mouth pulled wider than ever, ready to swallow them whole.

Her heart beats faster and faster as her heels beat a rhythm out behind her. She is approaching the

fence, hoping for her first kiss, wondering what it felt like when history came around the first time.

SYCAMORE

Eight: On the street, as our bewildered hero blinks in the sun, a roving reporter with a live feed:

“You're an educated man, mister Set—”

“Set Zero was, at least, yes. I like to think that I am being a good steward of his talents.”

“That's a good place to start. In the frequent interviews given in your ninth life, after your goal of eliminating your backups with inTrust was publicized, you made a clear distinction between yourself and the as-yet-inactive backups. Why is that?”

“You've caught me at a bad time, I'm afraid. I have just woken up and have a case of the cobwebs.”

“How do you react to the evidence that individuals who own at least five personal backups have on average a fifty percent higher life satisfaction rating than those with four or fewer?”

“May I have a moment to review my predecessor's leavings? I'm afraid that I was given only the audio diary, and—”

“What did you leave for yourself, mister Set?”

“I would prefer to retain the rights to my predecessor's intellectual property, for the time being.”

“Do you subscribe to the Original ideal?”

“I'm sorry, which?”

“How long can the public expect to wait for the completion of your quest?”

Set Eight, with a smile, “I'd quite like a cup of coffee.”



Seven: As a secondary, more idle curiosity Set wondered how many different ways he could die. So far he had suffocated himself inside a plastic bag and leapt from a moving train as it passed over a trestle. There were still a half-dozen dirt naps left to take before he satisfied his primary curiosity. If he could manage not to repeat his predecessors' methods, then so much the better.

The only thing was, he might not know it if he did. Memories only flow in one direction and each backup could only remember up until the time of its creation. One could just as soon ask a river to gush uphill than expect Set to awaken each morning after death with any experience of life, or death, beyond the basic template, the state he had been in when he first backed up.

The backups were stored at various havens around the world, warehouses positioned so as to be optimally safe from flood, tsunami, eruption, and earthquake. Set Zero, an adjunct professor at a modest American college, had been able to afford eight such

backups through his school's insurance policy, with the option of stacking more if he so chose.

Set Seven could remember arriving at inTrust's satellite office. He remembered checking in with the scowling young nurse who verified that he understood the risks and would not hold the company liable in the event of any disasters arising from his monumental vanity. He remembered the liquid diet they put him on for two days while the chips were inserted and the unique patterns of his brain were archived. After that, all he could remember was waking up that morning in a colorless apartment with a migraine, a craving for a cup of coffee, and a message from Set Zero playing like an unbroken daydream until he gave it his full attention.

Set Zero had had thirteen good years of life without dipping into his stock of selves, apparently. In the message, he attempted to justify, to himself, his decision to tear through his backups, to live once again on the cusp of death. Set Seven smiled; Zero had awkward phrasing and a familiar crack in his voice. He must have really meant it. It was evident that Eight had gone along with the idea and a few minutes on the news feeds told him how, but not exactly why. It seemed Set was a bit of a celebrity; there was even an informal game underway to try and find his next backup before he did away with himself again.

Set was in no special hurry to die. He got dressed and strolled outside. "London," he said, taking a deep breath. "I've always wanted to visit London."

It was a lot like Seattle, only people spoke faster.



Six: "I thought I'd find you here. When I heard that your next was in Seattle—"

Set looked up. The stranger had long hair, expertly cut, and a coat of stubble so thin it looked to have been painted on.

"I'm sorry," said Set. "I know you, don't I?"

The stranger took a step forward, edging onto Set's horizon of comfort. "I was Zero's friend. My name is Gunter."

"It's nice to see you again, Gunter," said Set with a smile. Gunter hesitated a moment — and Set thought he looked like a man trying to come up with way to explain to the neighbor children that he just ran over their cat — then he shoved out a hand to be shaken. Set took it and gestured for Gunter to join him on the bench, which he did.

"Did I come here a lot?" asked Set.

"This is where we did our guard stint," said Gunter.

"I was in the guard?" asked Set. He turned and tried to face Gunter but a park bench is not an ideal place for a conversation. Gunter was staring out at Puget Sound and answered with a nod. "That doesn't sound like me at all," said Set.

"You might have been drunk," said Gunter. Then, "I've been reading a lot about you. You never struck me as a wasteful guy."

"Is that what I'm doing? being wasteful?"

Gunter nodded. A seagull hopped over and pecked at his shoes. "Did you leave yourself a message?" he asked, kicking the gull away.

"I fail to see how it's wasteful," said Set. "I'm an organ- and tissue-donor, after all."

"You jumped fifteen stores, the first time. There were no organs left."

"Granted, but the gun left everything below the neck just fine, and asphyxiation doesn't harm a thing. Well," he added, "Apart from the obvious." Gunter ought to have at least smiled.

Instead, he said, "I never liked your sense of humor." Here came the push off down a racing slope. "I hated the way you talked down to my brother when we were in the guard, and I hated that I laughed about it with you afterward. I couldn't stand it that night you tried to get him drunk, and it pisses me off that you don't have the scar anymore. Hell, I even think you're ugly." He scowled and let the words fly out to sea with nothing there to echo back against.

The gull had returned and was pecking at Gunter's shoe laces. He jerked, like a patient having his reflexes tested, and sent the bird hop-skipping away. Then he almost smiled.

"I'm sorry," said Set. "None of this means much to me."

Gunter shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Why did you come back here?"

"This is where my body—"

"No, I mean right here."

Set thought for a moment. "I don't honestly know," he said.

Gunter stood up, showing Set his profile. He jammed his hands in his pockets and hunched as though expecting rain. "Why don't you stop playing your life like a video game, yeah?" Then, "I know why you came back here. Your body wanted to go back to the scene of the crime. This is where you killed him. Remember?"

Set tried to protest as Gunter walked away, but "It's a nice view," was the strongest he could come up with.

"I'm notifying the police," said Gunter over his shoulder. "Go to hell."

Five: The librarian was an old man. His knuckles were large with arthritis; he smelled like pipe smoke and baby powder. Leaning close, he tapped the screen. "Right here's the ones you want, son," he said.

Set thanked him and apologized again for not knowing his way around the new reference system. The librarian shrugged and smiled and shuffled off to finish the morning chores that Set had interrupted.

The particulars may have changed, but the basics were the same. Set did a search on his name and sat back to read. Hours passed. His eyes started crawling with concentration spots. There had been plenty of mundane events in his life, citations by his employer, that sort of thing, but there was one article of more interest. It was dated two years previous and told of a murder on the quay for which there had been no arrest. The victim had been named Halt, and he had been active in Seattle's gay community. He was survived by one brother. Set was quoted with a vague witness statement, saying he was close to the victim.

"When did I realize I was gay?" Set wondered aloud. The librarian ambled back over holding a hard-copy newspaper. Set looked him up and down, tried to find him attractive. Probably not my type, he thought.

"You made page three," said the librarian, offering the paper. Set took it and read. One of his bodies had been found in a Peruvian drainage ditch, missing its head and liver.

"How many you got left, then?" asked the librarian.

"Zero didn't make a backup in Peru," said Set.



Four: "Would you like anything?"

"Thank you, mister Set, but no. May I record your opinion of the Originals?"

“The original who? Isn't there a band—”

“The phrase is used to denote individuals who claim an ideological stance in line with the One Life manifesto, published three years before your first death.”

Passing up the chance to make a snide remark. “I love a good manifesto. How does it read?”

“I don't have permission to quote verbatim, mister Set, but I can inform you of the basics. The author desired to preserve original life. Many of the author's philosophies originated in eighteenth-century aristocratic sensibilities, though such criticisms have gone unmet. Each human, the author argued, is allowed one life, and one life only. The merits of medical transplant procedures are espoused in an addendum.”

“Fascinating,” said Set.

“Thank you for your time, mister Set. I have won the tee-shirt.”



Three: A sunrise in Saskatchewan is instantaneous, like a switch being thrown. There are no valleys or crevices for stalwart bands of night to hide in. Set had to shield his eyes. He had woken up at three in the morning, which seemed like an odd time for his predecessor to die. Periodically, he checked the news, but his death notice hadn't hit, yet.

He was waiting for businesses to open so he could get a cup of coffee. It seemed like a very long wait. The small cell he had awoken in belonged to inTrust, and they would evict him after he felt he had full control of his functions. He had been furnished with feed access, a cot, in case he felt weak, and a window to help him remember where he was.

“So, I'm number three,” he said to himself. He let Zero's daydream message play again and felt a shiver run up his back. There was something Zero hadn't said, Set was certain, something he had hidden from his descendents. Set remembered back in grade school when his father hadn't let him come home after classes, had him play in the yard while he and Set's mother zipped back and forth in front of the living room window like ducks in shooting gallery. When they finally let him come inside, the air smelled like Lysol and there was something that looked like blood on the carpet.

And when he asked about his dog, Bones, they said he ran away.

Set wondered what had really happened, and if Zero had ever learned. On an impulse, he checked the feeds; his father had died four years ago. “Dropping like fruit out of season,” said Set.

There was a knock at the door. When set didn't immediately rise to answer it, there was a second, and then someone on the outside coughed and said, “It's the police, mister Set. Open up.”

Faintly bemused, like when a student asks a tough question, Set opened the door. There were two officers, one with his gun drawn, and a detective. The detective looked as if he were a couple weeks past retirement. His badge was pinned on his lapel, identifying him as detective Hyssop. He saw Set read his badge, so he didn't bother introducing himself.

“May we come in, mister Set?”

“Oh, well, it's not my property, exactly, but please.” Set stepped aside. As they stepped in, the other officer holstered his gun, but didn't snap the clasp. “I'm sorry I can't offer you coffee,” said Set.

Detective Hyssop smiled like lightning and coughed like distant thunder. “I have to ask if you are aware, through natural or artificial means, of the

warrant issued for your arrest. Just in case,” he added to the officers.

It sounded as if it needed a strong reply, but all Set came up with was, “No,” and a widening of the eyes.

Detective Hyssop sighed and gestured to one of the officers. The officer removed a length of zip-tie from his pocket and stepped up to Set. “Put your wrists together, out in front, please.” Set did so. The sound the tie made was like corduroy pants.

“You're under arrest,” said Hyssop, but he was cut off by his violent cough. He drew a misfolded handkerchief from his pocket and spit dark phlegm into it.

“That's a nasty cough,” said Set.

“Call it habit,” said Hyssop. “You're under arrest, and have been charged with the murder of Halt Greenaway of Seattle, Washington.”

“I didn't do it,” said Set.

“There is significant evidence to the contrary, mister Set.”

“I didn't do it, detective Hyssop—” he pronounced it incorrectly “—because I was just born. I've never set foot out of this room.”

Detective Hyssop sighed and leaned back against the wall. He rubbed his eyes as though tired and tried to suppress another cough. “Jonathan Set is charged with the murder of Halt Greenaway. Are you Jonathan Set?”

“That is my name.” Set wasn't the type to stand up to authority, but he was feeling petulant as a newborn. He stiffened his back and tried to stare detective Hyssop down.

“You're under arrest, mister Set. Do you understand?”

“What if my name were Lee Harvey Oswald, detective?”

The officers were settling into a stance that suggested they would be here for a while. They folded their arms over their chests and bent their knees slightly.

“Are you a religious man?” asked Hyssop.

“No,” said Set.

“No, you wouldn't be,” said Hyssop. “Got to tell you, I don't think I'd be here if you were. You people are filling the earth right up with your carbon copies, and each copy means what? means that there's that much more room for the soul to spread around in. Just my personal theory. But you keep dying, and you keep living, and you're making heaven too fucking crowded.”

Set felt as if he had been called in front of the principal. “I didn't do it,” he said.

They took him out to the car and stuck him in the back seat. Hyssop and one of the officers rode with him, the other officer following in an unmarked car. Set tried to order his thoughts, tried to uncover some hint within himself about what his predecessor's may have done. It was hard to concentrate, because Hyssop kept coughing.

The officer turned and asked, “When you goin' in?”

“Tomorrow,” said Hyssop, spitting. “Tomorrow. Lungs of a thirty year-old.”

“Nice,” said the officer.

“Yeah.” Hyssop twisted around in his seat to peer at Set. “What do you think about that, son?”

“Congratulations,” said Set.

Hyssop made a crooked grin and nodded as though he had scored a victory. “You know what you remind me of?” he asked. “My son had a cat when he was a boy. Stupidest damn thing I ever saw. Chewed on mouse traps. Stuck its claw in a wall socket. It was dumber'n the kid, I swear. Last straw was when it

climbed up the tree out front. Tried for ten minutes to get it down, then I said, Screw it and left it up there. Made a noise like you wouldn't believe. Too damn curious for its own good."

They were driving into the sun. Even squinting, Set couldn't see a thing. "I have faith," he said, just because he knew that word would summon up a cough in Hyssop. "No idea what I'm going to see when I get to the top," he went on. "But it has to be something worth seeing. I'm a very trustworthy man, and I've known some." The sun disappeared behind a warehouse that looked as if it might house a space shuttle. Set could see inTrust's logo, the daisy-chained stick figures holding hands, plastered on the side. "What are we doing here?" he asked.

The car stopped and Hyssop got out. "Welcome to your new home." He chuckled. The officer opened Set's door and helped him get out. As Set stood, he saw the officer's holster, still unbuttoned. He didn't say, You're not the police; he guessed they knew already. He felt a flash of anger at his predecessors and seized onto it. The heat in his brain was quickly transformed into the warm gun in his hands. He broke away from the officer and tried to run. He tripped over his own feet and ended up on his back in the dust. The officer was running at him and Hyssop had turned to watch.

Set fumbled the gun around, barrel toward his head, and put his thumb on the trigger. "Someone else's problem," he said. Let the cat get down on its own. One step at a time. That's how you move mountains. As much as you can lift, one load at a time.



Two: Set listened to Zero's message and then opened his eyes. He was lying down and there was a bare

fluorescent tube crackling above him. He tried to raise a hand to shield his brow, but found he could not move either of his arms. His legs were similarly restrained. He craned his neck, felt the vertebrae pop, and looked down at himself. He was spread-eagled on a bed, nylon straps looped around his wrists and ankles. There was an indistinct shape near the door of the tiny room. Set could feel his pupils contract against the light.

"Welcome to earth, mister Set," came a voice from the shape. Set blinked to bring the shape into focus. It was a middle-aged woman, slightly overweight, wire glasses on her nose, the pencil-pushing type. She was carrying a clipboard.

"Why am I tied down?" asked Set.

"You've been belligerent," said the woman. "I'm sorry."

"I apologize," said Set. "Did I hurt anyone?"

"No," said the woman. She took a step forward and clutched the clipboard like a weapon. "I work for inTrust Corporation, and I wondered if you would be willing to take a look at a couple of forms."

Set fumbled his tongue around in his mouth. It felt thick and fuzzy and in desperate need of coffee. "Is this the first time you have asked me?"

"No, sir," said the woman with a rueful smile.

"What are they?" asked Set. The woman brought her clipboard over and positioned it in front of Set's face.

"How's that?" she asked.

"Back a little," said Set. The forms came into focus. Set read quickly. "Cloning authorization," he said. Then, "This is backdated. Two years?" The woman said nothing. "What am I doing here?" asked Set.

"You're a difficult man to get a hold of," said the woman. "Like a greased pig." She pulled the clipboard

out of reach. "I've listened to your message," she said. "It's nothing; it's not poetic or religious. I can't understand why you've put seven bodies in the morgues, nor can my superiors." She took off her glasses and cleaned them, scowling at the grime. Her countenance lifted when she slid the frame back over her ears. "Now, I'm afraid, you're going to have to be patient."

"For what am I waiting?"

The woman looked as though she were about to leave without answering, but she paused on the threshold and said, "To be born again," and Set could tell she had to cut the laughter out.

She left the lights on. Set tried tugging at his restraints, but there was no give to them. He listened to Zero's message again, to the compelling conviction that he didn't know his vocal chords could muster.

One more left, he thought. They'll probably have him under guard as well. I wish I could record a message for him. I'd say, Sorry I dumped this in your lap. Nothing I could do. Seemed the most appropriate action at the time.

He debated trying to choke himself to death, trying to swallow his tongue, but it wouldn't pull far enough back. He wondered if he could make himself vomit, but after a few minutes of flexing his stomach muscles all he had was heartburn.

He kind of wanted to laugh. They wanted his permission to make additional clones, to be farmed off as organ donors for those who didn't want to spring on a backup, or who didn't want to lose a few minor years of experience.

A few minor years. He was reminded of the time he spent three years in college hot on the heels of a girl named Lace. He signed up for the classes she attended; he tried so hard to make her laugh that she actually did. She hated smoking, so he quit for a while.

She liked going to church on Wednesday evenings, so he gave it a shot and quite liked the music. He knew, just knew, that a little perseverance would go a long way, and it ended up going five miles to the bar to pick her up one night after her ride bailed, and then six miles back to her apartment, twenty-three steps up to her room, and ten feet to her bed.

Set realized he was smiling. He pulled the corners of his mouth down; they were sore with effort. That wasn't me, he said. That's just context. I am Set Two, newborn. There was a convergence in the past, but it was like a myth, a story to enlighten purpose in the present.

He remembered Lace once saying, Faith is being sure of what is hoped for and certain of what remains unseen. That did the trick. He felt his throat clench and bile crept into his mouth. A flex and twist of the body and a whole wave sloshed up. He coughed and choked and some of it came out his nose.

He held his breath as long as he could.



One: The body had been shipped, upon receipt of payment, to an aluminum building in Peru where two surgeons with identical accents removed its unconscious brain, just in case, and then took his liver for an elderly economist who was too much in love with tequila. The surgeons had no outstanding requests for the other organs, so they dumped the body in an irrigation ditch where it floated into a field of hops and was spotted by the farmer's son.



Zero: It was an explosion, a burst ill-aimed and wide. Seven bullets, four went into the bushes, three

punched an Orion's belt across Halt's chest. He fell, twisting on his knees, his weight jerking front-to-back. He landed face-down on the cement and coughed. The gunman — he had a wispy mustache and couldn't have been more than eighteen — took two running steps down the path, then stopped, slipped, came back for Halt's wallet. He ripped out the twenty bucks in cash that was supposed to be for dinner and then ran off, not looking back, just like a coward.

Like a coward, thought Set, and crawled out of his hiding place. He had spotted Halt from a distance and had slowed, just because he liked to look at him. He had thin German features, and was trying to grow out his hair. Just as Set was about to raise an arm and holler, the young gun had slouched up to Halt, hand out, asking for a light. Halt had shaken his head. The kid's hand came out again, this time with a folded twenty in it. Halt had smiled — wide German mouth could carry a smile a hundred yards — and again shaken his head. The kid's hand disappeared and came out with the gun and Set had leapt into the bushes.

Like a coward, though Set, along the path of least resistance. He rushed to Halt's side and wasn't the first one there. "I'm a doctor," he said, which had never quite been true. He got down on his knees and looked into Halt's eyes. One was open, one was fluttering like a butterfly shot down by a child's water toy.

The police came and took his statement and then he tried to sleep. Almost fifteen years in the same job, same city, same bed. It had never been comfortable. Apathy had left him tired and depressed, a parasite emotion. Set had realized this; he was a smart guy. Joining the guard for a couple weekends a month had been good for him. There, he had met Gunter and Halt and their beer nights became Set's best memories for a time.

One night, after Gunter had passed out, Set and Halt sat on the bar's front steps and talked about the goals of their lives. Halt wanted to be a painter, and Set wanted to stop being a teacher. Halt said, You can do anything you want, because your brain is so damn big. Set said, Oh yeah? Halt said, Absolutely. You have to trust a brain that big and beautiful. Set grinned and let his head fall under all that weight. Halt leaned in and kissed him on the cheek.

There was a memorial service for Halt back in Spokane, where his folks lived. He had had no backups; he blew all his money on paint and canvas. Before boarding the train over the Cascades, Set went to inTrust's Seattle offices and recorded the message for his descendents; they provided the service, but it wasn't in high demand, since most of the deaths they dealt in were sudden.

"Aren't you curious?" he said into the microphone. "I am. I have to do this, and I hope you'll do it with me. There is no tang in this life without the risk of loss. I can not communicate in words what I hope you will understand. I have faith you will understand. Who knows?" He bit off a laugh. "It could be fun." It wasn't quite what he wanted to say. The recorder clicked off. "I'm sorry," he added.

On the train, he had a beer in the dining car and then went back to one of the sleeping cars as they passed over the mountains. He forced the door open; the wheels threw up steam and locked. A bubble of questions and mild screams grew and burst and forced Set right on out.

They were on a bridge. The chasm was deep and dark, like hell, but cold and fresh, like heaven.

It seemed poetic. It seemed fair.

It seemed easy.

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE FICTIONALIZED

Click. Ambient hiss.

World Science Journal: There. That's better. So, the question on the table—

Gregori Egorov: No, I'm not worried—

WSJ: Hang on a sec, Mister Egorov. I'll repeat the question for the recording. With all the litigation being brought against proponents of free information, are you concerned about the legality of your project?

GE: I'm not worried. When I first set [the project] up, in my fourth year of university, I was using a random number generator. My earliest published successes, the first near- or exact-copies, were attacked by owners of the originals, the templates, as violations of copyright. And, in a sense, the copyright holders were right. I had created the numbers artificially, which, in the courts, looked very much like an analogue to me just sitting

down and tracing a cartoon, say, or copying, word for word, a short story.

Then, during my post-graduate studies, a mentor suggested to me that I use pi as the basis for the project, rather than a random number generator. I would yield similar results and be legally unassailable.

WSJ: Why is that? Why use pi?

GE: Because it is an infinite, non-repeating series of digits. All possible combinations of numbers are contained with it. And I can't be accused of creating the content I publish, since pi itself cannot be owned under the world copyright code.

WSJ: All the information is there?

GE: It's all there. In the public domain. You just have to find it.

—•••••—

Gregori Egorov, in a black bathrobe worn to threadbare transparency, tripped down the last four steps, righted himself on the landing, and blinked in the sunlight. It was very much like coming down a flight of clammy concrete stairs and into the belly of a mad scientist's underground lab, if you discounted the wide open curtains, children playing in a sprinkler outside, and the smell of bread in the oven. Not to mention that the only madness evident was a tendency toward anal-retentive cleanliness.

Watta was in the kitchen, cross-legged on the counter, fiddling with one of the dials on the oven. She turned and spread her arms for Gregori.

He signed, *Burn*, and raised his eyebrows to show it was a question.

She heaved a sigh, signed, *I'm not child*, and opened wide her arms again, demanding to be held.

Gregori lifted her by her armpits, blowing out a thick lungful of air. "You need to lose a few, honey,"

he said. She wrapped her furry arms around his neck and craned her own to plant a wet kiss on his cheek.

“Aww, thanks, stinky,” he said. Her palms dangled down to his butt. She squeezed. “I’m sorry. You need to learn to be more gentle, my love. I haven’t recovered from last week, much less last night.” The warm saliva from her sound of distaste spattered against his ear. “Let’s get to work, huh?”

She nodded and signed, Okay, as punctuation.

Two desks ran along each side of the living room, which jutted out from the side of the house like an arm or a neck. Floor-to-ceiling windows ran the whole length of the room, interrupted by wooden struts. Taped, tacked, and gum-stuck to these struts were hundreds of printouts, from legal-sized pages to slips the size of cookie fortunes. One desk faced the walkway out front, the other the back yard. Each desk had a series of flatscreen monitors, desk lamps, and small linked-paper printers at the end. It looked like the office of a team of private investigators who both struggled with seasonal affective disorder.

“What did you say you lost, ma’am?”

“My bestselling novel. I haven’t written it yet.”

“Hang on. Let me open the blinds.”

A sheet of banner paper had been glued to the window, just above eye level, of the latter. *Watta’s Desk*, it read, and underneath: *cat frown* and a rough drawing of an eighth note. That had been relatively easy to find in the mess of pi. Watta had gone nuts over the random words that had followed the legend, and had refused to sign anything but, Cat Frown, for a week.

She scrambled up into a thick black leather chair at her station and steepled her toes. She stared at Gregori, drumming her hands on her feet; he had stuck his hands in his pockets and was now breathing deeply the warm greenhouse air. He stared out at the

street, at Doctor Jema from next door walking his dog, at the two teenage girls sunbathing in the front lawn of the next house over.

Watta pushed away from the desk with her arms and rolled her chair into the back of Gregori's knees. He stumbled, turned, and laughed. "Sorry. Nature hypnosis." She peered around his arm and pointed at one of his terminals.

In large print, so it would be easy to read from a coffee break in the kitchen, characters were spilling in black across a white field.

@8 | *nmymotherisafis*

Mother, signed Watta, her eyes wide enough that Gregori could see his own grin in them.

Something hit the window. Gregori leapt, banging his knee into the desk. The safety glass spidered and dented at the point of impact. Watta crawled under the desk to peer out the bottom of the window.

"Bird?" asked Gregori. Watta scooted out, behind first. Brick, she signed.

— — —

WSJ: Do you work alone?

GE: You know I don't. Didn't. That's an intentionally leading question. I'll answer it anyway.

WSJ: Mister Egorov, I wasn't—

GE: Yes you were. Yes you were. It's not like it's a new question. I worked and I lived with Watta, my life partner. All right? She was a pygmy chimpanzee, one of the two dozen or so that were given citizenship thanks in part to the Animal riots in the twenties.

WSJ: Did you participate in those riots?

GE: I did not. I was too busy researching my dissertation.

WSJ: Which you never delivered, correct?

GE: Yeah. Didn't seem to be much point. [Watta] and I got a modest subsidy because she's a pre-human citizen. [laugh] She doesn't like it when I call her that.

Gregori read the note again.

"This isn't even literate," he said, letting the crumpled paper slip to the floor. "You're sure you didn't see who threw it?"

Watta nodded.

"Right in front of my desktop, too," Gregori continued, squinting through the tangled mess of white lines. "Going to have to replace the whole window."

Behind him, Watta was listening to scraps of nonsense. Most of it sounded like static to Gregori's ears, but occasionally there were tones, the crash of a chandelier falling, or wind shoving past the house. It was like listening to a badly scratched sound effects record.

Letting his eyes blur, he noticed that the dense center of the impact looked a bit like a mouth wide open, if he inverted his perception and let white equal black. A thin band of cracks surrounding could have been lips. A bundle of wild hair, white being white again, shot straight up from where a forehead would be before circling around to frame the cheeks, two spots of unbroken glass. A round-faced wizard, it looked like, staring straight out of the pane, conjuring Gregori's world *ex nihilo*.

From Watta's workstation came the distinctive metallic twang of Tin Pan Alley guitar. He whirled in his chair. Watta was standing on her desk, dancing in front of the radio she kept at the end.

"Watta!" He scowled at her. She flipped him the bird and grinned widely. Tired, she signed.

Sighing, Gregori turned back to the window. He couldn't pick out the wizard's face again.



Glitch. Pop.

WSJ: —were after the recipe for Guinness?

GE: I had already placed it in the public domain. It didn't make much sense to steal it. No, I think they had a different agenda.

WSJ: What, then? Revenge?

GE: No, not revenge, though it's not something I'd put past the Irish. No. I haven't told this to anyone else, Jerry. But the bullet would in Watta's head was located directly between her eyes. It wasn't a random shot, a shot in the literal dark.

WSJ: Why would anyone want to assassinate Watta?

GE: My wife was political. Not as a hobby, but just by virtue of her existence. She didn't enjoy the polarization that surrounded our lives. She mostly wanted to sit around in the study with me, watching and listening; she lived for the adrenaline of discovery. Physiologically, chimpanzees are much easier to addict to the chemical. She knew she was, but she didn't want to give it up. We went on a vacation, once, to the back yard. But the neighbor kids didn't know how to sign to her, so I ended up turning her text displays around so she could read them from her lounge chair.

But political factions suffer from [a long pause] creative differences. There are some, it is plain to me, who, if given a One if by land, two if by sea sort of code, would promptly forget what it meant, as well as their battle cry and where the guns were buried. Countrymen to count on, they are. Now with night vision goggles.

WSJ: And what was the end result; to where did that tragedy bring you?

GE: Well, they made off with my computers, and a bunch of the archives. But big deal. I had backups, and the server is buried in a cooling system under the badminton court in the yard.

She killed at badminton. Always hit it over the fence. Don't know why those neighbor kids never learned how to sign.



It was a bad day for concentration. Gregori was imagining things in the pages of text scrolling past him, now. He could see faces, hands, people in the gaps between blocks of characters, in the configuration of punctuation marks. These two periods close together made eyes, and from them poured a waterfall, pounded by slashes and capital Ls.

He gladly took a break when the workmen arrived to replace his window. They said, We won't disturb you. We can do it all from outside.

"I'm gonna get some coffee. You want any?" he asked Watta. She shook her head to one side, not meeting his eyes. She was sulking about having to turn the radio off.

It was getting on toward evening. Gregori stood by the kitchen window as the kettle rose to a boil. The sunset was beginning, but it wasn't worth staying around for. Not a cloud was in the sky; the boring gradient shaded from navy in the East to dust in the West, and that was it.

The kettle whistled. Gregori poured a mugful and stirred in a teaspoon of freeze-dried crystals, even though the caffeine would keep him up tonight.

Back in the living room, the workers had finished unrolling the new window and were tamping its

corners into place. Gregori watched them as he tried to compose a short poem in his head. The warm coffee, his bare feet in the carpet, the workmen standing still and fading into the deepening night, it all fit somehow together. He couldn't find how, not with his own words.

Watta screeched. Found something, she signed with flailing arms. Gregori coughed, spit coffee onto his bathrobe.



WSJ: How many works have you forced into the public domain in this way?

GE: Uh, only four have actually been ceded to the public. There was this novel published a few years back — *Starve a Fever*, by the Canadian author Bess Kashuba. That was the most recent. Last year, I think, the publishing house's lawyers relinquished it. The print version had a typo on page eighty-eight. Mine didn't. That was pretty funny.

WSJ: Only four?

GE: Well, yeah. It's slow going, the process of discovery. But that's all there is now. There's no such thing as creativity anymore; just discovery.



Gregori stopped reading aloud. His tongue tasted funny to him. He made a sound through his nose that might have been a laugh if, halfway through, it hadn't turned into a sneeze.

“That's the end,” he said. “It trails off into gibberish after that.” From her perch in his lap, Watta gave a grunt of dismay. She fumbled around so she was facing him.

Not accurate, she signed.

“Should I publish it?” he asked.

She shook her head. Might happen, she signed small, between her folded feet. She turned to stare at the flickering images on another display. Gregori watched her fidget with the thin fur behind her ears. She heaved out a great sigh and turned again, resting her long arms on his thighs.

You didn't cry, she signed.

“No, I didn't. It wasn't me,” he said.

You somewhere, she signed.

Tired, she signed from her elbows down.

Play, Gregori signed, smiling straight across his face, too tired to hold the corners up. “You pre-human citizen you.”

She leapt up onto the desk and waddled to the radio, her arms up for balance.

Click. Ambient hiss. Cat Scratch Fever.

BY THE FLICKER OF OLD LIGHT

My little sister Luisa was a religious nut. Not like the guys who stand on corners and yell prayers that I think were meant to be whispered; no, she was more like my dad, who could talk about tractor engines long past when the coyotes went to sleep, or like me with my obsession with genealogy. She just loved religions, the plural. She read about them, thought about them, meditated on them, sang about them in the shower. For her twenty-third birthday, I hand-drew her a family tree that showed how our ancestors on our father's side could be linked back to John Calvin, and how our mother's side grew out of a relative of the cardinal Richelieu. She hung it in her apartment, right over the television set. It was the only decoration in the room that wasn't a religious artifact. Mostly, she had statuettes: Jesus and Kali, saints and fertility goddesses.

It was hard to watch movies on her little set, because of all those pairs of holy eyes looking on. "Can't you turn them to face the wall?" I remember asking her a few months back.

"They bother you?" she countered, with a grin that served as a separate answer entirely.

"You're a nut," I told her. Around that time, she was tracking the progress of the von Teuer comet, astrology charts in her bedroom and strange incense burning at her windows. She gave all that a glance and gave me another grin.

She disappeared some time in the next month, when the comet hung in the sky like a fingerprint on an old photograph. I thought it was a little weird that she didn't call me up to watch movies for those few weekends, but sometimes she withdrew into her apartment as if it were a shell, and I had learned to let her be.

One day, her landlord called me up to say she was past-due on her rent, I dropped by her place on my way home from work. I knocked gently, in case I was interrupting a long and thoughtful prayer, and then a little rougher when I didn't hear her familiar sigh through the door. She had entrusted me with the spare key to her place, but I didn't have it on me. I drove home, dug for the key, and drove back to her complex; all the while my fingers were quaking just a little, as if my knuckles didn't fit quite right together.

Her apartment was empty; rather, it was full of her usual ecumenical mess — broken-spine hardback books, figurines, posters, globes, and star charts — but had that quality of settled, sluggish air that told me my body was the first displacement it had felt in quite some time. I checked around the closets. Her old Goodwill duffel bag — the one she always took camping with dad and me — was missing. It wasn't like her to up and disappear for so long, but it was

plenty familiar the way she bailed and forgot about rent. This is the girl who dropped out of college twice in two weeks, after all. I made a deal with her landlord, paid half what she owed, and headed home.

That night, as I was flipping through channels, my phone rang. The shrill tone identified the call as coming from a number not on my list, but my eyes were kinda aching for a focus other than the television set, so I answered it.

“Am I speaking to Jacob Tripp?” asked the caller. It was a woman with a pleasantly quiet voice.

“This is he,” I said.

“Are you the brother of a Luisa Dee Tripp?”

“I am. Did you find her?”

There was a forced cough from the woman, then, “I’m sergeant Wendy Stokes of the Masi PD. I’m sorry to be calling so late, mister Tripp, but we have had a situation down here.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Mister Tripp, we need your help.” She copped the tone from my apology. “Plain fact is your sister may have been involved in a suicide. We’re hoping you can make it down here.”

“For how long?”

“There’s a body, mister Tripp. If you can identify it, then it won’t be more than a couple hours.”

Ms. Stokes gave me the few details I could handle and hung up. There had been a group suicide of cultists nearby Masi. They had burned their wallets and purses, then killed themselves sitting in a circle like for Duck-Duck-Goose. Luisa’s ID had been partially legible. The cops had tried calling dad first, but he hadn’t answered his phone, so they called me. I told them I’d be there tomorrow.

The television told me the same story not an hour later. The police had gotten to the story before the media, I guess. I was kind of glad for that, but I

listened to the news report anyway. The cult had called themselves the Children-Who-Will-Never-Burn, just like that with the hyphens. They had had white T-shirts printed up with the group name on the front and numbers on the back. There were ten bodies taken to the morgue, but the numbers only went up to five. Two corpses wore ones, two wore twos, and like that. Nobody had the details on how exactly they died.

I tried to call my dad, but his phone just rang. It reminded me of how I used to call him in for dinner when I was a kid. He'd be out working in the fields, and I'd stand on the front porch and yell for him, over and over, until he came in. I lost count of how many times I let the phone ring, but it was enough that my heart started to beat in sympathetic time. I hung up and tried to sleep.

After a couple hours of listening to the blood in my ears, I got up, got a drink of water, and tried my dad again. This time, he answered.

"Was down at Gloria's," he said. He sounded drunk.

"Dad—" I really didn't know what to say. All I knew was that I didn't want to sound like the movies. "The police down in Masi called me. We need to go down there. They might have found Luisa."

"She all right?"

"No, dad."

There was a pause as he let the words sink in. Then he said, "Shoot, son. I'm not gonna remember this in the morning. I need to eat something. I'm coming in."

"Dad, no. You're drunk. I'll come get you."

It was an hour out to our old farm, which dad still ran mostly by himself, and an hour back. Not much was open that late. We ended up at an all-night diner I'd never been to before. I ordered water and nachos and dad got a medium steak.

We had talked a little in the car, but it was more our family tradition just to watch the signposts go by. Sitting in our booth, though, dad seemed to have a lot in his mind, and wanted to get it all out. It didn't bother me, listening to him, because my own mind felt empty, almost weightless, and I appreciated his loaning me some good, heavy reality.

"Anybody else we should call?" he asked. "That boy she's with, what's his name?"

"I don't think they stayed together very long."

We had a lot of these two-or-three line exchanges. He'd start one up, we'd do a volley, and then let it drop, like a pair of inexpert tennis players.

After we got our food, both of us shut up for a while. Dad shoveled too-large forkfuls of meat into his mouth, and kept coughing on the spices. I thought he was going to choke. We shared my glass of water, spinning it around at every pass to find a place on the rim not stained by the other's lips.

Dad swallowed his last bite almost unchewed, then gulped down the last of the water. "Do you remember when she went vegetarian?" he asked. He traced knots of beef blood on his plate with the tines of his fork.

"Yeah," I said. "It lasted longer than her boyfriend."

"Sat on telling us until right before the turkey came out of the oven." Dad shook his head and dropped his fork with a clink. "That night, after you kids left, thought I had some sort of stroke or heart attack, but turned out it was just some sort of pain from having kids what don't appreciate things you do for them. Made me think of your mom chuckling at me, like telling me I knew how it felt after all those years of me asking for more ketchup to dump on her dinners. She, as an angel, must laugh out loud, and it ain't just to please the good lord."

“We don't get to be angels, dad,” I said.

He smiled, most of it at the corners of his eyes, and, in my head, I filled in some words for him. I know, son, but sayin' it and thinkin' it are different altogether.

What he actually said was, “Excuse me, son.” He went to the bathroom. When he came back, I paid the bill and we shared a cigarette outside.

“You coming with me?” I asked when the cigarette was almost used up.

Dad took the last drag and stamped the embers out. “Nah,” he said. “If it's her, just bring her back. If it ain't her, you tell me right away, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He didn't want to go all the way back home that night, so I let him have my bed. I wasn't going to use it. I was still wide awake, and felt like driving some more. I packed myself a breakfast, gave dad a hug, and got on I-90 heading west.

It was a little past nine in the morning when I arrived in Masi. There was rain coming down hard enough that I couldn't see more than a dozen yards in front of me. I found my way to the police station by asking at a quick-stop, and then the duty officer told me I had to go to the morgue, which was down a couple blocks.

A clerk had me wait for sergeant Stokes, who showed up in uniform a few minutes later. The sergeant was short, with a style to her close brown hair that put me in mind of an athlete. She wasn't much older than me, I guessed, but she plainly knew how to wear her years to best effect.

She put out a hand to shake. “Mister Tripp,” she said. Competing expressions of honest and fake emotion made her lips quiver. “I want you to know that I hate my job.”

I smiled and it kind of hurt my cheeks. “It's all

right,” I said. “We can go quick, if you've got other stuff to do.”

Sergeant Stokes led me through a beige-colored door and down a metal staircase.

“Actually,” she said, and paused for the tinny echoes to subside. “No one else has come by, so you've got all my attention for the next little while.” She pushed through into a cold, cinder block hallway. With fluorescent lights above, it was as bright as a flashlight to the eyes.

“No one? None of the others had families?”

“Everyone's got a mama,” said Stokes. “Just none of them came down. Do you remember that heat wave in Europe a few years back? Hit France like a fallout?”

“Yeah, because no one had air conditioning,” I said.

“That's right,” said Stokes. “Old world living. But a bunch of elderly folks couldn't take the heat, and passed on by the dozens. So many, most of 'em forgotten or misplaced by their children. Their government didn't know what to do with the ones nobody would claim. We're gonna have something like that here, unless you want to claim a few more.”

We arrived at a set of wide double doors that put me in mind of those you'd find on the kitchen of a restaurant, with the glass portholes at head-height. Stokes picked up a clipboard that was hanging on the wall and scribbled her name.

“I appreciate you coming so far,” said the sergeant as she backed into the doors like a surgeon trying to keep her hands sterile.

I almost said, My pleasure. She had the kind of face to which I wouldn't have minded saying, Pleasure, just to see what crossed her face: humor? propriety? speculation? Instead I smiled, easier this time, and said, “Don't mention it.”

There were nine lockers marked *Doe* and one

marked *Tripp**. The sergeant led me to the latter. "Are you ready?" she asked. "It helps to take a deep breath."

I did as she suggested. The locker door squeaked as it opened and the rails rumbled like a filing cabinet's. The body was draped with a plastic sheet. Stokes grabbed one corner between her thumb and forefinger and gently lifted it away. Luisa was underneath. Her eyes were closed and her lips were slightly parted, as if she were about to giggle.

"That's my sister." Stokes nodded and moved to replace the sheet. "No, wait." I reached for the sheet. It was slippery between my fingers. For a moment, all I could think about was our mom telling us not to play with the grocery bags, because we'd get them around our heads and suffocate. Luisa wanted to know what suffocation was.

"It's all right," said Stokes.

I curled one finger and brushed it against Luisa's cheek. She felt like a candle, inexpertly made, her pores imperfections in the wax. Stokes was staring at me; she was being polite about it, but I could sense the heat of curiosity. "She looks . . . bored," I finally said. I withdrew my hand and the sergeant replaced the sheet.

She tried to talk over the heavy clang of the locker sliding home. "Thanks again for taking the time to help out the investigation."

"I'm as lost as you are," I said. Then, quietly, "What did she actually die from?"

"We don't know," said Stokes.

"You don't know?"

Stokes bit her bottom lip lightly. "The press are going to get a statement in an hour or so, so I guess it doesn't hurt to tell you. There's not much in the way of evidence to suggest a cause of death."

"I thought the news said it was group poisoning,"

I said.

“It looks that way, but we don't know which poison or how it was administered.”

It felt wrong to be discussing methods of suicide so near to the bodies. I turned away from the lockers and headed for the door. Stokes caught me up as I pushed through. “Some weird poison the autopsies didn't catch?”

“We haven't run the autopsies, yet,” said Stokes. “There's a waiting period to give family a chance to speak up.”

I nodded, took a wrong turn down the hallway, and let Stokes lead. “She's an organ donor,” I said.

Stokes had a tiny ponytail at the back of her head. I watched it swing back and forth. “Body was dead too long by the time they got found.”

“She wanted to change her name when she was in the seventh grade,” I said. “She was tired of people telling her that she had their grandmother's name. She filled out all the paperwork. Decided on *Farrab Gautama Tripp*, like that would have helped.” I chuckled, while Stokes ponytail flipped around into profile. She stopped walking at the foot of the stairwell and leaned against the wall.

“You guys were close?”

“As a brother and sister can be. I guess that probably isn't so much.”

“I had a brother,” she said. “Just a couple years older than me. When I was six, he tried to smother me with a pillow. So, yeah, I'd buy that. I guess brothers and sisters don't get too close.”

“When Luisa was six, she put a plastic bag over her head,” I said. “I messed up getting it off, at first, but she turned out all right.” I leaned against the other wall and stared at my shoes. It was oddly comforting, revisiting memories in an unfamiliar place, like scattering seeds. “Detective Stokes—” I began.

"It's Wendy to everybody but the guys at the bar," she said.

"If you need my permission for an autopsy, it's fine. I'm curious, and I bet my dad would rather know than not."

"Thanks, mister Tripp." She pushed away from the wall and climbed the stairs. I followed. "Our guys will perform it later this afternoon. If you want to stick around, we can have the report in tomorrow morning, or we can call you."

"I'll stick around," I said.

"You got a place to stay?"

"I've got a room at a Motel 6."

She waved to me as I got in my car. Then I went looking for a Motel 6 to make an honest man of myself.



After I got a room, I spent an hour or so sitting in it, flipping channels on the television. The twenty-four-seven news stations were speculating all sorts of fictions about the Children-Who-Will-Not-Burn. The popular theory was that the Children had believed the von Teuer comet was their god, and it would take their spirits away from the Earth. My head filled with a frustrated disbelief, and I had to turn off the set and take a hot shower. As I did, I imagined the scalpel that would be cutting into Luisa, and the blood that was dried and pooled in the valleys of her body. I know how well a body can keep a secret, while its alive or after it has died. I've had challenges tracking down a buried ancestor that made me feel like Holmes on the trail of Moriarty; I've had equal trouble wringing a history from callused old men who want the leaves and branches of their family trees hewn off, and who curse me for reminding them of names and dates they

had almost forgotten from distraction. There could be no such mysteries in Luisa — her past was a puzzle easily assembled with an hour or two of practiced work. It felt to me as if she was, right then, at the peak of her life. Her times of harebrained obsession were past, down a steep slope, and in the future her story would bleed out into silence.

It must have been an idle frustration at not being there to witness such a high and honest point in her life that drove me out to the farmhouse where the Children had been found in their playground circle. It was late afternoon, and another rain storm was washing down from the north. The sun was angled just below the black clouds, picking out all the trees and hills in vivid, unearthly greens.

The farmhouse was set a quarter-mile off the road, surrounded by fallow wheat fields. The police had strung caution tape across the entrance to the driveway, so I parked my car on the shoulder and got out. I ducked under the tape and strolled up the driveway with my hands in my pockets, a tense thrum in my spine preparing for an officer to sneak up behind me and get me on disturbing a crime scene, or something. I kept checking over my shoulder.

As I approached the house, I heard a wooden shutter swinging loose in the wind, a rhythmless clacking. The front door had been taped up just like the driveway, but whatever adhesive had held it in place was beginning to degrade. Streamers of yellow drifted as if caught in the current of a stream. I brushed them aside.

There was only a screen door at the entrance, poorly-fashioned so that it didn't close properly. It rasped shut behind me and clattered on the frame. I was in a hallway, peeling floral print on the walls and a wood floor so scuffed it looked black. There was a plastic light switch fashioned in the shape of a Fleur-

de-Lis; I flipped it, but nothing happened.

The hallway led into a kitchen, beyond which was a tiny living room cramped with furniture and a cabinet TV. There were two thin doors, right next to each other, in the living room. One opened into a bathroom with a pull-chain toilet; the other revealed a flight of rough stairs.

I followed them up, one hand brushing against the wall. The second floor was split into two rooms, with one tiny hall dividing them. On the left was a bedroom. There were two beds, a chest of drawers, a vanity, a couch, and a recliner all strung together like a hedge maze. I could smell ammonia and old perfume.

The room on the other side of the hall was completely bare. There were divots in the wide planks of wood where furniture must have sat, and a bare light bulb hanging from an extension cord. The walls were covered with strange designs, shapes that might have been letters, and parts of a freehand grid. On closer investigation, the writing was all in charcoal. I hung back at the door and imagined ten bodies slumped in a circle on the floor. There were smudges of charcoal where they would have sat. I leaned over to get a closer look.

It was an extension of the faint grid that had been scribbled on the walls. The lines were roughly parallel, but swept clean where bodies and shoes had scuffed them. Near the middle of the room, the grid lines converged on a shape that had been left intact. It looked like a bell curve with an inverted peak. There were layers of soot, as if the symbol had been drawn and re-drawn numerous times.

I heard the stairs creak. I was on my feet before I knew it, and flattened up against the wall beside the open door. It felt as if a layer of cold air had been pumped beneath my skin, and my bladder was suddenly full. I waited. My legs threatened to bounce

with nervous energy; I gripped my kneecaps to keep them still.

Just when I was ready to suppose that the sound had come from the house's settling further into the dust, a hazy shadow appear on the floor beside me. It arrived with a sob, and following it was a middle-aged woman in sweat pants and an oversize T-shirt. She had curly black hair, roughly cut, and her lips were almost as thick as her glasses. Her cheeks were painted with a thin film of tears, catching the storm-light in neat triangles. She didn't see me. She collapsed on the floor, blurring out another panel of the grid, and put out her hands as though in prayer.

"Please come back," she whimpered, though the words were so choked with bitterness that they came out in ruins.

I stepped away from the wall. The woman wasn't so different from me, I thought. I guessed that she, too, had lost someone in the suicide. I mourned in silence; she mourned in noise. I knelt next to her, given over to some human need to keep the world in balance.

"I'm sorry to bother you," I said.

The woman jumped as though stung by house current. She fell onto her side and struggled to regain her posture. I almost looked away, to spare her dignity.

"Who do you want to be?" she asked. Her brows drew together and an expression of physical pain crossed her blubbery lips.

I didn't quite know how to respond. "I'm Jacob Tripp," I said.

"Oh, Jacob, Jacob," said the woman. "It's not time to be Jacob. There's no time to be Jacob." She slid over to me, supporting most of her weight on her arms. I could smell cheap wine on her breath. She let loose with one of her hands, rocking her weight, and

latched onto my arm. Her combined grip and inertia tore at my skin like an Indian burn.

"I was supposed to get milk and cookies." Her voice rasped, toneless. "I was supposed to get milk and cookies and bread for the trip. I don't understand."

"What's your name?" I asked. I tried to squeeze the fingers of my free hand under her grip, to loosen it, but she just held on all the tighter. The tendons of my wrist danced over each other as she wobbled, each time stabbing me with a pain that refused to dull.

"One, two, three, four, five, six," the woman said. She was frustrated; I could tell by the frightful tension in her hand. It spoke of a failure of other forms of communication. I couldn't understand. "One, two, three, four, five, six."

I got to my feet, and rather than be pulled up with me the woman let her hand drop to my pant leg. She bunched the denim in her fist like a child unwilling to let a parent leave the house.

"I have to go," I said.

". . . four, five, six."

I shook my foot, trying to dislodge her, but it only made her redouble her effort. "Let go," I said. "Hey, ma'am."

She made a hideous noise; it rose as if through a bubble of hot pitch, and when it burst a stream of spit and thin vomit slipped from her mouth, carried more by gravity than convulsion. I tried to twist out of the path, but it was like moving with one cement overshoe. I fell forward and hit the floor with enough force to set a constellation of splinters into the heels of my hands.

I heard myself grunt — maybe I heard my echo; it sounded unfamiliar. I rolled onto my back, ignoring the wrenching of the joints in my leg, and kicked out with my free foot. I would love to ascribe it to a reflex

from the pain, a simple flight response that thrummed up from annoyance to desperation, but I know it was a savagery far less noble.

The waffle-rubber of my shoe connected with the woman's left cheek. I felt the shock reverberate up my bones until it shook my kidneys. The woman finally let go of my leg and spun away on her hands and knees, still counting from one to six. She coughed up another mouthful of watery bile and then spit out a tooth.

I scrambled to my feet and stumbled backward into the doorframe. The woman turned her face to me. She snarled, and I saw the gap where her tooth had been. It was smooth, pink, and bloodless. I didn't waste time being startled, just then, but dashed down the hall, leapt down the groaning stairs and fled out into what had become a torrent of warm rain.

The further I got from the house, the slower I jogged. I scrubbed at my hands to rid them of the itching splinters, and it wasn't until I got into my car, with a ginger hold on the wheel, that I noticed that there wasn't a drop of blood leaking from the numerous tiny holes in my skin..

I drove faster than I should have back to my hotel. I took a shower and walked across the street to buy a small bottle of mouthwash. Then, skin tingling inside and out, I lay on the bed and tried to sleep. There was a sodium light right outside my window. It glared right through the blackout curtains. If I rolled to face away, I could hear the hard electric buzz more clearly; it cut through my exhaustion like a saw. When I finally did fall asleep, it was only long enough to see the red numbers on the bedside clock switch in a blink from 2:13 to 3:46.

There was nothing else to do, so I arrived early at the morgue, with a cup of coffee and that slight drunken feeling, as though my muscles could only move at half speed. I waited in an uncomfortable chair

for what seemed like hours, until the duty officer asked, "Are you waiting for someone?"

I mentioned sergeant Stokes' name and the officer picked up her phone. Fifteen minutes later, I had run out of coffee and Stokes stamped in through a side door, shaking out a soggy newspaper. When she saw me, she smiled with a dimple.

"Good morning, mister Tripp."

I stood and shook her hand. Despite her having been out in the weather, her skin was warmer than mine. When she squeezed against what was left of my splinters it felt as if her hand were covered in rose thorns.

"Got any news, sergeant?" I asked.

She made a face; the dimple followed it down.

"Sergeant Stokes was my brother," she said. "Please, call me Wendy." Her voice shook a little and lowered. "And no, we don't really have any news, which could be big news if it got out." I must have looked sad and confused because she put a hand against my neck and said, "I'll explain. The autopsy on your sister showed no cause of death. Toxicology came back almost completely negative — I mean it didn't even have those base chemicals and bacteria by-products that are the sign of a healthy body. There was no tissue damage, and zero brain trauma."

"She died by being too clean?" The farmhouse, with its wood like broken bones and stained wallpaper, hadn't seemed like the sort of environment where someone would go to get clean.

"Not by bleach, or anything like that. There would have been a trace. Hell, there would have been a fist of the stuff in her stomach. But her stomach was empty. I mean *empty*: no breakfast, no bile. The report will say that the lack of natural and symbiotic bacteria caused her death."

She would have appreciated that, I thought.

Death by ultimate virginity.

“Listen,” said Wendy. “I’m pretty much done here, now that this is all filed. It’s out of my hands. Would you like to go get some real coffee?”

I grimaced and stared at the empty cup in my hand. “This stuff tastes like electricity,” I said.

“It’s a short walk in the rain or a wasteful drive three blocks. Your choice.”

We ended up walking, even though neither of us had an umbrella. The coffee shop was filled to capacity, so we sat on cold metal chairs on the front stoop and listened to the rain drum on the vinyl awning. Wendy paid for the drinks, and we spent a few sips in an awkward silence. I didn’t break it.

“You know, I do this for all my cases,” said Wendy. Steam billowed from her mouth and rose in sheets above her cardboard cup.

I nodded a couple times before the humor caught up to me, then I chuckled. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

A semi-truck rumbled past on the road. In its wake, our chairs vibrated and the shop’s window-glass hummed in its settings.

“You ever get quakes here?” I asked.

“This close to St. Helens, you better believe it,” said Wendy. “No big ones, not usually, but a couple times every season or so. More during the summer.”

“Quake season,” I said.

Wendy laughed a comfortable laugh, slow and rough at the edges, tapering to the hint of a snort at the end. “Quake season,” she agreed. “My brother, he used to come and get me when one was going on. He’d take me outside, wherever we were, and together we’d ride it out, like the whole world was a surfboard on an ocean of lava.”

“Sounds fun,” I said.

“Yeah. Once he grew out of beating me up, he

was all right.”

I was reminded suddenly of a moment from Luisa's teen years, after I had gone away to college. I had come home for Thanksgiving weekend, and dad was at the grocery store trying to find a last-minute, pre-cooked turkey. The TV had fofched out, so there was no Macy's parade to watch, nor football game to sleep through. So, we talked, Luisa on the couch and me in dad's old recliner. I told her how college was so much easier than high school, and she said she didn't believe me. She asked if I was sticking around the whole weekend so I could go to church with her and dad.

I was high on Intro to Philosophy, and threw words and names at her, like, “Nietzsche,” and, “herd mentality,” as if they were fists out of shadows. I told her that I slept through sermons, and she said, hardly above a whisper, that there was this senior girl I sort of liked who had asked if I would be coming to youth group.

“Tell her hi for me,” I said. I went back to school on Saturday afternoon.

Wendy finished her coffee and spun the cup lazily between her palms. “How's yours?” she asked.

I smiled and poured the last bitter mouthful down my throat. “I can't remember,” I said.

She leaned back in her chair and let half her mouth stretch up at the corner. “Yeah,” she said, not so much agreeing with anything I had said than going along with my mood.

“Do you miss your brother?” I asked. I wondered how close to my mood she was.

“I don't so much, anymore. Now I kind of just remember from time to time that he used to be here. The regular world doesn't have him in it. I guess I've gotten to a place where I don't mind that.”

“I'd like to be in that place,” I said. A breeze

shifted toward me and I caught the scent of her hair, the warm oils of her scalp and a conditioner that seemed lighter than the air, as if different smells had discernible weights. "Is she still at the morgue?" I asked.

"Your sister? She's there, but—"

"I want to see her again."

"They did a full autopsy, Jacob."

"I just want to see her face."

Wendy took a deep breath, then nodded. We walked back to the morgue in silence. At the door, she said she had work to get to and thanked me again for helping with her investigation. She shook my hand and disappeared. The duty officer let me down to the refrigerators, then waited outside the door for me to finish.

I slid open Luisa's locker and folded back the plastic that covered her face. There were straight cuts just below her hairline, faint as spider webs, where the coroner had lifted off the top of her skull. Her lips were slightly parted, as if waiting for a kiss. I obliged, but on her waxy cheek.

"I'm sorry," I said.

I felt something shudder in my legs and thought, in succession, that my heart was beating too hard, that a minor quake had struck the town, and that I ought to sit down. I heard a sound that reminded me of a cow stamping for its food, and then the door opened behind me. I spun, expecting to see the duty officer. A man stood half-crouched in the oblong of fluorescent light allowed by the swinging door. He was wearing a rumpled brown suit and he held a thin metal stake in one hand, wielding it like a club.

My first thought was slight guilt, as if I were somewhere I shouldn't be. I knocked Luisa's locker closed. As I did so, the corner of the metal door caught along my forearm. It stung, and scraped away

strip of skin, but it didn't bleed.

"I'm sorry," I said to the man in the doorway. I moved around the diameter of a circle with the door as center point.

"What are you doing here?" the man asked. He flexed his knuckles around the stake and let its point drift toward me.

"I was told it was all right to visit my sister," I said. I held up my hands, palms outward.

A wave of something like effort cut across the man's face and left it in deeper shadow. "You can't," he said.

"I'll just head back to my hotel," I suggested. The man gave me the panicked look of a student without the answer, then tossed the same look over his shoulder.

Behind him, the door opened again and two more men entered the room. They were wearing the same rumpled brown suits as the first man, giving me the impression that they were unused them, like a teen in his first, poorly-fitted tuxedo.

One of the men gave me a long, cool glare and finished it with a quick sigh. "Keep him out of the way," he said.

"Yes, master," said the first man. He shifted the weight of his weapon and came at me. I shuffled backward; the man matched me two steps for one. I slipped and fell against a corner, lifting both arms to shield my face. The man was on me in an instant. Through the crook in his raised elbow I saw the door open again, allowing another pair of men in wrinkled suits. Between them, they held the duty officer, whose head hung limply from her shoulders.

Then the metal bar connected with my forearm. Its tip was sharp; my shirt ripped and I felt a series of distinct pains in skin, muscle, and bone. Gradually, they lost all their boundaries and blended together, an

aggregate wailing of nerves. The weapon came down again, and a third time, and I sat down hard on the cold floor.

“Don't get up,” said the man. He left to join his master. I coughed mucus and tried to let the resonating pain bleed out into the concrete. I noticed then, as I tested the strength of the bones and tendons of my arm, that there was no blood. A ribbon of flesh had been torn from my wrist and left dangling, but it was pure pale white. There was no bed of crimson beneath it. I stared, mesmerized, as, in my peripheral vision, the duty officer was deposited on the floor and the men in rumpled suits gathered by the refrigerators. At a signal I couldn't see, they each grabbed a handle and yanked out the trays with their human cargo. The master, regarding the covered body below him, spoke something that may not have been English, and two of the men came to his side. Together the three of them lifted the body, still draped in its thin plastic sheet, and carried it toward the door as if it were a log of firewood.

The remaining men took up two other bodies and maneuvered out into the hallway, murmuring banal advice to one another, such as, “Twist a bit,” and, “You're gonna hit the hinges.” I thought of carrying Luisa's couch up four flights of stairs when she had moved into her apartment.

Only the man with the metal stake remained in the room, to watch the officer and me. I was all right, a bit fuzzy on the details of the present, but otherwise coherent. The officer was still unconscious, and drooling a bit from the corner of her mouth. I couldn't see any blood, though, so I turned my attention back to the man with the stake.

“Don't get up,” the man said. I didn't realize I had been trying.

“I won't,” I said. “I'd rather not cause any

trouble.”

“Good goal,” said the man. He grinned, but not cruelly. He had a face like one of the boys, like ought to be half-buried in a pint anytime after seven. I had never been in a bar fight, but I had just about convinced myself I could take him — after all, I wasn't bleeding; I couldn't have been that badly injured — when the other men returned.

Whispers passed through the air like house flies, frantic and aimless. The men were tense, and constantly looking over their shoulders. Between them, they managed to grab all but one of the remaining bodies. When two of the men grabbed Luisa's body by the arms and legs, the sheet that had been covering her slipped off, leaving her naked. I hadn't seen her naked since back when we were children in the bathtub together. As she hung between two strangers, I couldn't tell if she was lovely or not.

I had been nursing a spark of heroism, but now it flared up without my intervention. I felt a core of molten blood snake out from my heart, but it had nowhere to go. The men were rushing past me, hauling their cargo through the door. Luisa disappeared, and I forced myself to keep my muscles tense and unmoving. The leader was the last one out; he turned to my attacker and said, “We're out of time. Get the last one.”

As his leader left, the man glared at me. “Don't even let it cross your mind,” he said. Carefully, he wedged his weapon into his belt, within easy reach of his swinging arm, and crossed to the last body. His back was to me. The snakes in my blood coiled and then sprung, pumping out my arms and legs and raising me to my feet. I took three steps before his body registered the sound of my feet and I was on top of him before he could fumble the metal bar into his fist.

We fought like spiders, with no muscle behind our exchanged blows, just the harsh pumping of hearts. For a moment, I seemed to be winning, beating the rumpled man down so he was half hanging on the extended locker. His feet swung out and took me down forward. My face hit his chest, right at the breastbone, and I felt the cartilage in my nose give way. I threw myself backward, landing crab-like on my hands and feet, and scuttled away. When I was out of reach of the man's legs, I raised a finger to staunch the blood I was sure would be pouring from my nostrils, but when I withdrew my hand to inspect it, it was perfectly clean. I thought maybe that I hadn't been hurt as badly as I thought, but a quick hand to the side of my nose sent an iron spike of pain right up the nerves to my brain.

Some confusion must have shown on my face, because the man, spitting out a white ball of phlegm, sneered at me and said, "Would you like to understand?" He leapt to his feet with a speed I couldn't follow and whirled around the locker so he could face me with the last body laid out between us. I didn't even get up; Luisa was gone, my nose and arms were throbbing with sine curves of pain.

The rumpled man chuckled low in his throat; it sounded like the language of the aboriginals. He put both his hands, fingers splayed, against the body — it was a middle-aged man, with a wad of gray hair sprouting awkwardly from around his temples — and coughed up a word I couldn't recognize. His eyes rolled back, showing a pair of orbs that, even at a distance, I could tell were bloodshot. Then he screamed.

At once I was surrounded by light, but it was neither warm nor comforting. It was old light, decayed, if such a thing were possible, into its roughest form. It abraded my skin. I absorbed it into

the color of my clothes, hair, and eyes. It scraped my flesh raw, and being in its presence was like witnessing the death of a star: a loss so great as to magnify the preceding existence into something incomprehensible.

I wept, but I think maybe my body was just trying to cool my cheeks.

The light faded, and after images populated the inside of my eyes three deep, shading over one another like layers of gauze on a wound. I saw my hands and felt for a moment as if I were imagining them. I flexed my knuckles, and watched my knuckles flex, and gradually the chasm of disconnect closed. I was on the floor, curled on my side like a seashell.

The rumpled man was laughing. I blinked a couple of times and made him out, lying on his back in the corner by the unconscious officer. There were tears streaming out of all four corners of his eyes, which were closed.

“She is free,” the man got out between high, scratchy giggles. I raised my head. The slight movement jarred loose something in my head and blood began to pour out my nose. There was so much, and coming so quickly, that my eye lids quivered as though facing into the wind. I threw my head back and pinched the bridge of my nose. As I did so, the as-yet absent blood from the beating on my arm dripped onto my cheeks. I switched arms and lay still for a few moments while the rumpled man just kept on laughing.

“Who is free?” I asked, because I kinda wanted him to shut up. Gradually, he did. I could hear him breathing, but I didn't want to risk moving again. I felt weak, though whether it was from loss of blood or from the sight of so much of it I couldn't tell. I heard fabric rustling and crumpling and a quick metallic snap. I blinked heavily.

The rumpled man stood over me with a police

pistol in one hand. "Be thankful you haven't gone blind," he said. There was a madness in the way his eyes caught the fluorescent light, a bloom of facets that betrayed a shattered mind. It reminded me of the time I went to a Pentecostal rally with Luisa. We were a little too close to the stage. When the men and women began streaming up there to be slain in the spirit, some of them fell with their eyes open, and I saw the same fractured gazes then as I did now.

The rumpled man clicked the gun's safety back and forth. He glanced around the room like a hunted animal, just one circuit, and seemed to forget about me. With one last, explosive chuckle, he ran heavily out the door.

I waited for my body to regain a bit of its strength, counting my time by the irregular sound of blood dripping off my cheek. I could feel a clotting in my nose and made an exploratory nod of my head. Nothing gushed out, so I moved a little farther. Soon, I was sitting up, resting my back against an open locker, and cradling my wounded arm in my lap. Short of going to the hospital, there wasn't much I could do for it, and a trip to the emergency room wasn't exactly at the top of the stack in my mind.

The men had taken Luisa's body, which was odd in itself, but the care they had shown to all the bodies disturbed me right down the bones like a dissonant note. I had to know what they were going to do. I thought I heard engines roaring on the street outside, so I hushed my breathing and tried to listen closer. Hot pulses in my ears drowned out just about everything by my own thoughts, and even they seemed to be shouting.

I had to move quickly if I wanted any hope of catching up to the men. I levered myself up to a slouch and put out a hand to brace myself. It fell into something soft and damp, like Play-Doh. A bullet of

bile rose up in my throat even before I saw what it was. The last body of the Children-Who-Will-Not-Burn was split open down the middle like a cocoon on a summer morning. Glistening threads criss-crossed the gap. Gray-and-crimson organs lay about like the fragments of exploded ordinance. As I bent to vomit, praying there wouldn't be blood in it, a thought struck me: had the light *hatched* from this man's body? When I couldn't give myself an answer, the dry heaves started.

Still bent double, I shoved out of the morgue. I could only smell blood through my broken nose, but somehow it seemed less potent in the cinder-block hallway. I rested my hand against the cool stone for a couple of breaths, and then hobbled up the stairs as fast as I could.

The duty officer was still passed out in the corner downstairs, so there was no one at the desk to question the exit of a hunched and bleeding man. I supposed if there had been anyone nearby, they would have taken off running after the men with the corpses.

I made it to the sidewalk and had to shield my eyes. It was dark outside from heavy clouds, and most of the cars on the street had their headlights on. The glare from the twinned halogen bulbs sent spikes and rough memories into my brain. The light that had erupted from the dead woman's body — had it been alive? The rumpled man had said, "She is free." He had done something to the cadaver. His hands and voice had coaxed the brilliance out of its fleshy shell.

Would they do the same to Luisa?

I made it to my car with one hand shielding my eyes. I saw behind the wheel with the sun visor flipped down. My nerves and muscles felt as if they were vibrating in sympathy to an echo. Dad used to have me mow our two acres of lawn on his old tractor. On a good day when the grass was dry it'd take me three

hours. After so long in the torn bucket seat, shaking along with the barely-held beast of a diesel motor, my bones always felt like jelly. Sometimes I thought my skin had gotten so used to the quaking that it kept on going all by itself. Everything I touched felt smooth; everything inside me felt rough. I felt the same, squinting into traffic with my hands locked tightly on eight-and-four.

I had no idea where I was going, so I drove slowly. I made a slow circuit around the block, getting into turn lanes when too many other cars piled up behind me. I glanced down the side streets, not sure what I was looking for. I didn't even know what kind of vehicle the rumped men had driven.

I thought about Wendy, but it was mostly wordless. I thought pictures — Luisa and Wendy meeting out on dad's farm, casting long shadows onto the side of the slatboard house where the Children burned, gestures magnified in distorted silhouette. Luisa, her hair slicked back with sweat, giving a last gasp and birthing a little boy. I made an effort to replace her face with Wendy's, but the familiar won out on the new.

As I drove in circles, my eyes gradually adjusted to the light, and I flipped up the shade. The sky looked too heavy to stay in the air, hot lead and melted wax. I rolled down my window and let my bloody arm hang out. The air tasted like electricity, like so much potential energy. I drove in circles.

Suddenly, above a traffic light, I saw a point of luminous white. I couldn't tell how far away it was, nor how large — was it an airplane or a transplanted firefly? It seemed to me more like a star, but the clouds occluded any glimpse of the deep sky. It was moving like a satellite, steady in one direction and flickering as if the atmosphere were interfering.

The traffic signal turned green and I pulled across

the intersection so as to keep the flickering light in view. It was old light, the light of a star. Someone honked at me, but right then it didn't register as anything but a noise — not even a noise, but an echo of a noise that has traveled a great distance.

The low star led me out of town. It began to rain again, but the light pierced through the huddle of fog and droplets and drew me along the highway, headed south and to the east. Gradually, the other traffic faded away until I was alone on the road, my head lights pushing through the water like a tired swimmer's arms.

My eyes drifted up from the road. The low star seemed to have changed direction and speed. It was headed directly east, now, and quickly. At my first opportunity, I turned to follow it. I found myself on an oil-and-gravel road, snaking through short grass and a forest's new-growth. The dashboard odometer, which I had zeroed out at the beginning of my trip, rolled over three-hundred miles.

I emerged from a copse of trees and saw where the light was headed. The broken skull of Mount St. Helens lay on the hills like a corpse on a padded coffin. The light made two quick turns and then seemed to hover right over the mountain's gaping jaw. My depth perception was off, but I couldn't see it moving anymore. My eyes had been tracking its progress for so long that the sudden halt tugged the rest of world away from me to compensate, much like the theater seems to rise underneath your feet when the last of the credits have rolled.

The road I was on became two unpaved ruts. I could hear tall weeds clacking against the car's chassis. Before long, even the ruts were came to an end and I could drive no further. I opened the door and got out. The air smelled of the heavy minerals of rain and, though my ears were full of the sounds of trees

scraping their needles against each other, I couldn't hear a single bird or beast. I focused on the light and imagined that everything I could hear was emanating from it, like a soft electric hum.

I shut the door, regretting the unnatural sound of the metal-on-metal slam, and started walking toward the slope of St. Helens.

As I drew nearer the mountain, my lungs pumped harder. I told myself that it was the elevation, but there was something else, a mixture in the air that coated my mouth and throat a little more with each breath. If I thought too hard about the next inhale, I stopped in my tracks, so I tried to keep my attention on the light.

I was almost directly beneath it, but I could still discern no shape. It was so bright that it populated my eyes with after-images even as I stared. Each blink produced a throng of stars, not quite near enough to touch.

I could not think it was beautiful. There was nothing beautiful about its featureless brilliance. Perhaps if it were much farther away, a lost member of a host in the sky, I might recline on a grassy hill and be comforted by the whole. Instead, I stood beneath it, one worthless hand casting a near-invisible shadow over my eyes.

The light dipped and spun in small movements I hadn't been able to detect from my car, though it never moved a degree in any of the four cardinal directions. It seemed frantic, almost child-like in its nervous motion. Whether it had led me or I had followed it, here I was, and here is where it had meant to go.

I tore my eyes away and bowed for a few moments, aware of labored breathing and of another bout of temporary blindness. As the Earth slowly faded into view, a hot breeze stung me across the

cheek. It carried something caustic with it; my nostrils burned on my next breath, as if I were standing too near a bonfire. My eyes watered.

Above me, the light intensified. I could see my shadow picked cleanly out in high-contrast on the brush and dirt. The sourceless heat and the heatless light combined to make me feel like an escaped convict, caught in a seeing eye and burned up by a poison criminal blood inside me. I wanted desperately to hide.

There was a crack in the ground not far from where I was standing. At first, it seemed as thick and black as a shadow, but there was nothing tall enough to cast it. I ducked and ran toward it. As I drew closer, I could see a guttering light from within; it was dim, as though many times reflected. I stood at the fissure's lip and tried to gauge the distance to its hard-packed floor. It wasn't far, I thought, but it was difficult to tell for sure, like trying to guess the depth of perfectly clear water. I got onto my hands and knees. The hot breeze was coming right up out of the fissure like the labored breaths of a sick man.

There were sounds that blew into my ear, mutters of consonants that sounded like half-remembered dreams. They were voices, laced with the choking heat. A fragment of words I couldn't understand blew up with every gust. Someone was inside the mountain.

A particularly foul pocket of air surrounded me. I held my breath and rolled into the fissure.

The floor was only a few feet down. I landed with my face in the dust and saw a dozen footprints crossed and kicking at each other. All the prints were identical, a simple corrugation in the rough shape of a foot. I drew another breath, though it pained my lungs to do so, and held it as long as I could. The fissure led into a cave, heading toward the center of the mountain. That's where the footprints went, and so I

followed.

As I walked, I remembered one summer with Luisa when we convinced dad to buy an above-ground swimming pool. Every afternoon, we were in that pool, betting nickels and quarters on who could stay underwater the longest. We would duck under at a count of three and then wave at each other, putting on fake grins as our lungs burned up with carbon dioxide. It was an alien world under the surface: blank and blue, with only my sister's face to remind me of what would be waiting when I couldn't take it anymore.

Now, as my throat seized up and my nose tried to draw in the smallest trickle of oxygen, I felt the same as I had then, floating underwater. The next summer, Luisa had gone on to running cross country, and we hadn't even bothered to fill up the pool.

I couldn't take it; I ran out of air. I got low, imagining the air would be purer there, and blew out. It felt better to exhale than to draw in another lungful. It was getting harder to breathe in, as though my throat were constricting, or, like a well-used chimney, were clogged with soot.

I spent a few long moments breathing as slowly as I could. The voices were louder now, though no more comprehensible. There was a lilt to the words, a tone that sounded kind of like chanting, but more like the orders of a drill sergeant. I glanced over my shoulder; I had managed to put a few good turns in between me and the low star's light, so now the only illumination came from the flickering red and orange further down the tunnel.

Keeping my head as low as possible, I proceeded on toward the source of the voices and heat. It seemed that with every step the temperature raised a degree. At some point, the loss of blood I had sustained caused a cold, sweaty wave across my skin as the veins close to the surface drained out. The difference in

temperature between my guts and my skin, and between my skin and the torched air, made me wonder if my body would crack wide open, like a cube of ice dropped into boiling water.

There was a brilliant flash of light. For an instant, my mind reported that my fears had come true, that I had split down the middle and this was the point of my death; but then the light faded, and I was none the worse off. The voices reached a fever pitch, a drawn-out scream, and then went silent. My muscles tensed; I expected one of the chanters to come around the corner at any second.

The voices began again, low, but with the promise you find in classical music when every note suggests crescendo. I crept forward. The air not only hurt my lungs, now, but had planted a constant sting in my eyes. There was so much water in them that, when I first turned the corner, I didn't quite believe what I was seeing. Only after I had blinked and rubbed them raw with my gritty fingers was I able to trust them.

The tunnel opened up into a cavern about two meters from floor to ceiling. Its walls were smooth and curved like a calculus diagram. The whole space was filled with waves of heat and a vivid orange flicker, both of which rose from a pool of molten rock that flowed out from under the far wall. The men in rumpled suits were standing in a loose semi-circle in front of the pool. Their hands were outstretched toward each other; their fingers scratched at the empty air as if playing so many instruments.

The corpses of the Children-Who-Will-Not-Burn were piled like firewood off to the side. There had been ten. One had birthed whatever it held inside of it back in the morgue. I counted the heads. There were eight.

I crouched behind a boulder and watched, though every breath seared the inside of my lungs. The man

who had beaten me stood nearest the corpses. I watched him the closest; his features were pale, almost deathly, and I realized that, though I could feel drops of sweat congealing from my pores, his face was completely dry. Even from a distance, I could see his jaw muscles flexing, as if in deep anger or concentration.

The chanting grew as it had threatened to and filled the chamber with a cruel, unresolved cadence.

Abruptly, the chanting stopped, and the man who had beaten me reached to the pile of corpses. With a grunt, he heaved the one nearest him over the edge and into the magma. There was a shriek and a burst of light that forced me down behind the boulder, using it as a shield. After the initial shock, I raised myself up just high enough to see. The light was dimming, from a solid white to a pale translucence. Hovering above the magma pool, at the luminous center, I could make out the hints of a body. Legs, arms, or lines that might approximate them. Just before the light bled out completely, I caught a glimpse of a thin head and a face, with discernible eyes and lips. It had high cheekbones, and a brow that sloped gently into a brilliance that might have been hair.

The face disappeared, but it had burned itself into my retinas. I closed my eyes and explored its details as it slowly dissolved into the chaos of black and red under my lids. Up to the last, the face had no expression; it was as naturally emotionless as a summer sun.

The leader of the rumped men began a lonely chant. "She who is set to watch over the smoothing of stones," he sang in monotone. I opened my eyes. The strange ritual began again, with the hushed foreign tongues and the certainty of increase. This time I concentrated on the words of the chant, but I could make none of them out. They didn't seem to be

discrete syllables, but rather a long string of hard-tongued consonants forced unnaturally together.

It reached its grating conclusion, and the man who had beaten me reached for the pile of corpses. He lifted Luisa in both arms.

I tried to shout to stop him, but I couldn't force the air through my throat hard enough to make a sound. It was like being in a dream, when you can't speak, can't read, or even run. I forced myself over the boulder and hit the floor on all fours. I scrambled toward the men, but I wasn't fast enough. I wasn't even close.

Luisa's body fell into the magma and I kept on scraping forward, gouging my knees and palms on sharp pebbles. The men bowed their heads and I took a deep breath. An explosion of light filled the cavern and even seemed to penetrate my skull, scattering the shadows from whatever corners I had woven in my brain. I felt completely naked, utterly visible.

As before, the light slowly faded. I craned my neck up, lacking the strength to rise to my feet. There were legs and arms in the light, and a face. It wasn't Luisa's. It bent toward me just for an instant and all the perfection of the features broke open in a gentle smile. Then it was gone. I closed my eyes to hang on to the curve of those lips.

The leader chanted, "She who is set to watch over the expression of grief."

I fought to draw a breath, and failed.



I came to in the same room, though further away from the magma pool. I had been leaned up against the wall and my neck was sore. I took a few exploratory breaths and found that the burning had ceased. My skin felt cooler as well, or maybe just closer to the

ambient temperature.

The leader of the rumpled men was sitting cross legged a few feet away from me. The rest of the men had gone. The leader noted my open eyes with a nod and said, "We are not going to hurt you. You are in bad shape, but you won't be getting worse."

I tried to speak and coughed. My throat was scratched and raw, as if I had just recovered from a terrible cold. I tried again. "What happened?" It came out sounding like a cricket orchestra.

"Whole books have been written on that subject, my friend," said the leader. "Whole religions have been founded on no greater a question. No, don't talk," he said, raising a hand to cut off further questions, though I had thought of nothing better to say than to repeat myself. "You may not be aware of this, but volcanoes tend to harbor large pockets of poisonous gasses. Your larynx had suffered tremendously by the time you interrupted us. Once you were unconscious we were able to— well, let's say we sort of put a gas mask on you. Kind of closing the barn door after the horses have run off, I know, but think of it like this: you're only sort of dead."

He had an easy way of talking. He seemed to be on good terms with each of his words, and the lines of his middle-aged face made it look as if he had spent all his youth laughing.

"You told him to keep me out of the way," I croaked.

The man smiled and ran a hand along one of his wrinkled sleeves. "I don't often play games with my words, mister Tripp. And I recall that I did not explicitly ask mister Fog to beat you into a pulp. You may have noticed that he has a tendency to overreact."

"Yes," I said.

"There are many links in the story I want to tell you, mister Tripp. I could begin with mister Fog and

his slight contribution, or I could begin with your sister. Really, I could begin anywhere.”

“Why? Are you going to kill me?”

The man's wrinkles deepened into glacial valleys when he smiled. “No, I am not. You'll find that I rarely entertain the thought of cutting a facet from the jewel of the world. As for why I want to tell you a story, well, it's kind of for the same reason. If I tell the story, we run a lesser risk of you going mad. If you have the chance to tell yourself a story, stitching together all you've seen in the past few hours, you're liable to be writing on walls with a stolen lipstick before long. Also, I fancy myself a bit of an evangelist.” I waited for him to continue, mostly because it took so little strength to listen. “Your sister, then, or mister Fog?”

“Luisa,” I said. It took too much to keep my eyes open, so I let them close and just listened to the rumpled man and his story.

“Good enough. Your sister somehow found herself in the midst of a group of slow religious fellows, as I assume you know. This congregation was mostly harmless, and entirely thoughtless, but they did have one thing going for them: they were completely right. In the scattered beliefs they professed, a god would be visiting Earth on the tail of the von Teuer comet, and that god would be taking the faithful away from this planet. It was a bit more complicated than that, more of a Noah's ark thing, but no matter. Just because they were right doesn't make them important.

“I don't mean to suggest that your sister was unimportant, just that her recent fellowship was not likely to have a significant impact on history — in fact, I believe that they wanted to slip away with as little a disturbance as possible, which is why they did what they did. It's funny, but out of their desire to go gently into some good night, they have worked some

irreparable damage.

“Whatever scatterbrained ideas they had about their religion, they were thinking clearly enough to recognize that if their bodies disappeared from that farmhouse, there would be investigations and ragged ends that would stay with their families for a lifetime. They didn't want that, so they decided — independent of any consultation with their god — to create replacement bodies, just dead things to fool the coroners and grievers.

“The trouble being that it is difficult for anyone to create a human being, except in the normal fashion, and that wasn't going to be practical at all. So, they borrowed a measure of power from their god — he wouldn't miss it, just like you wouldn't miss a stray hair plucked from your head — and forced certain creatures, ten in all, to adopt their likenesses, to remain behind when the faithful had ascended.

“You might call these creatures angels, but only in a medieval sense of the word. These are creatures that perform a strict governance of our universe. They are set to watch over aspects of life, body, emotion, and science. The common misconception is that the universe would continue to function as it is without any intervention, but that is not the case, even on the grandest scale of big bang and big crunch. Momentum is not enough. These angels cause, by their simple observances, water to flow downhill, blood to well up from a cut, gravity to accelerate at nine-point-eight meters per second, squared.

“In their confusion of familial loyalty and vanity, the Children stole aspects from the universe. Mister Fog told me you witnessed this yourself, when the broken skin of your scuffle remained dry and bloodless. The erosion of river stones, the scent of the asparagus plant, these things vanished from possibility when the angels were trapped.”

Luisa had once confessed to me that she wasn't sure that prayer worked. I hadn't known what to say to her, then, so she had done both sides of the conversation. Now, I wished I had said anything, or maybe everything, just talking forever. "Who would miss asparagus smell?" I asked.

"Is there any part of the universe that deserves to be excised on our judgment?" replied the man. "Perhaps you think the night sky would be more precious if only half the stars shone, or the world more harmonious if your life were to disappear. I do not like gaps in the world, mister Tripp.

"Now, though, it seems I must live with one. During your little scuffle, mister Fog had a brief moment of indiscretion. In what I can only imagine was desperation to stave off your tiger-like ferocity, he released one of the angels from her prison too soon. We stole the corpses so that we could properly reintroduce the captives into the universe through the power of our own god. Mister Fog, since he was acting alone, loosed that angel on the world. Think of it like this: the angels are a drop of ink, and the universe is water in which they are diffused. This place, in the presence of our father, is a tributary to the universe. Mister Fog and his primal motives dripped ink on bare ground, where it stained what it touched, and reaches nothing more beyond.

"It will take a great effort, now that she is free, to catch her again and return her to her proper place."

Angels and gods in the comets and fire and blood, I thought. I lifted my hands to my face and rubbed away the grit in my eyes.

"It's confusing," said the man. "But better to be confused than mad, I think."

He was right. My mind wasn't broken. My skin and body, my throat and lungs were going to be scarred from that night on, but my mind seemed to be

whole, like a sphere unblemished. Questions had been trapped inside that sphere, each with a trajectory that sent it bouncing from point to point, never repeating contact; but they were questions, not particles of rage or misunderstanding. I could live with questions.

“You said you were an evangelist.”

“Of sorts, yes.”

“For what?”

“For a god that is dead, mister Tripp. When a god dies, and its body burns, there is a gap in the world. There is a power in sacrifice that continues after the body has melted away. I am here to spread the good news that god has died, and there may yet be enough in our lives to replace the hole that he left.

“Now,” said the man. He stood and offered me his hand. I took it. Behind him, I could see the afterimages of angels, permanent scars on my retinas. “I imagine you have seen quite enough for one day. I'd warn you against talking too boldly with anyone about what has happened to you, but I think you've seen how people treat those with more than their fair measure of zealotry.

“I'm sorry for what mister Fog did to you, and I regret the distance your sister has placed between you. But it's time for you to go home. If you ever want to find us again, you need only come here. Just wait outside next time, all right. And I promise we'll keep the bludgeoning to a minimum.”

The man helped me down the tunnel to the fissure and gave me a boost up. The sun was up, but stuck behind a veil of clouds. The angel who had guided me here was nowhere to be seen. I stared at the sun, but it wasn't the same. The man in the rumpled suit gave me a pat on the shoulder and sent me on my way.

I found my car and started it up. My body still vibrated, giving everything that smooth feeling, and now my mind hummed along with it. My car's engine whined; I could hear overtones that sounded like the howl of an air raid siren, pitching higher and more frantic the faster I drove.

Masi smelled clean and big, the sort of rain-scoured freshness that reminded me of early morning on the farm. I slowed my car down as I hit the city limits, probably more than I needed to. I wanted to smell the air more than hear the awful howling of the engine.

I went to my hotel, took a shower, rinsed out my clothes as best I could, and fell asleep on top of the covers. I had only been asleep for an hour when I was woken by a rumbling that shook the mattress. My mind, caked in the leftovers of dreaming, thought at once that the Earth was quaking, that there was something angry in the stones and molten blood beneath them; but it was just an eighteen-wheeler downshifting on the highway.

It was almost check-out time, so I didn't go back to sleep. I straightened up the room a little and then took my key to the front desk. I wasn't eager to drive the long hours home, so I drove way under the limit to the coffee shop where Wendy had taken me. I sat outside on the patio, at the last free table. The others were taken by chatting couples and men with newspapers unfolded in their laps. The rustling of the newspapers sounded exactly like the low conversations to me, and both began to lull my eyes closed.

The ground vibrated through the soles of my feet; but it wasn't sudden, it wasn't a change. I thought that maybe the ground had always been humming like tissue paper on a comb, and I had been too loud to hear it.

Gaps in the world, the leader had said. I had had

gaps in my brain, in my understanding of the world and religion, and the leader had filled those in. Or had my mind been full and flawless already? Had the leader overstuffed me, like a bin on garbage day? Now I was split open. New wine in an old wine skin. I tried not to think of the world thrumming under my feet.

“Can I sit here, too?” asked a voice from over my shoulder. I twisted in my seat. Wendy was standing there with a small paper cup in one hand, her free fingers looped in the belt of her jeans.

“Plainclothes today,” I said and scraped a chair out for her.

“That's right,” she said. “I'm investigating strange men in rumpled clothing.” She nodded at me as she sat down. “You forget how to use an iron?”

“I was in a bit of a hurry this morning,” I said.

“Takin' it easy, now?”

“Just thinking.”

Wendy took a sip of her coffee. It wasn't cold out, but vapor from the drink billowed out her nose when she exhaled. “What happened last night?” she asked.

“At the morgue?” I said.

“Yeah.”

“I went in, saw Luisa again, and went back to the motel.”

“I guess there was a break-in some time after you left,” said Wendy.

My coffee cup was empty, so I spun it between my hands. “They steal anything?”

“Your sister's body, and the others,” said Wendy. She stared at me for a moment, as if gauging my reaction. “There were other members of the cult, coming forward since yesterday, saying how they got left behind. When they say anything coherent, that is. It's a mess, Jacob. I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” I said. “I got to say goodbye to her.”

Who knows? Maybe her spirit's still alive out there, somewhere unreachable.”

“You remind me of my first boyfriend,” said Wendy. “He was an optimist. He made all our wedding plans before we turned sixteen.”

“Oh, so you're married,” I said. When I smiled, I breathed a little differently, and some part of my burned-out throat protested.

I must have looked no better than the brain-dead addicts she saw every day, but her hand came out and hit mine and fumbled awkwardly for a grip. Her skin was warm and throbbing with nothing more than her own blood. I bought her another coffee, and we talked about our lives, and both of us said how weird that they seemed to belong to another person, sometimes.

She took me to her apartment, in a nice quiet suburb of the town, on the second floor where I couldn't feel anything shifting underneath my feet. When we came together, there was a gap between us. The spaces we held open — she for her brother, me for Luisa — combined to form a perfect circle cut out of the world. She did everything: the motion, the noises. The hole consumed the both of us; or if it didn't swallow us up, then our awareness of it was like an infinite distance between us. Two similar magnetic poles trying to touch and being forced apart by the nature of the universe.

I bought a soda at the corner gas station and managed to stay awake for the whole drive home. It was like driving dad's tractor; my teeth were on edge right up until I pulled into the parking space out front of my apartment. It was a clear night, so I stared up at the stars for a while, and thought that I probably wouldn't notice if one slipped away. The Earth was in the wrong position for me to see the retreating von Teuer comet. I called dad, let him know that Luisa looked beautiful, and then went to bed.

I have a copy of the family tree I made for Luisa's birthday framed above my headboard. At night, before I go to sleep, I tilt my head back like a man drinking from a waterfall and I read the names upside-down. I didn't put down any of the years of birth or death, because all Luisa cared about were the names. Mine, hers, and John Calvin's. That tree hasn't changed since the day I cramped my hands all to hell drawing it out.

IF THE GODS THEMSELVES ARE IGNORANT

Sammy came on like a plague of handshakes. “Hey, buddy. How're you? Say, did you hear about the Wands kid?” I gave him a firm grip and confessed I hadn't; I barely got the words out before Sammy went plowing ahead. “Yeah, no, he got thrown out of class. Cheated on a test. You ever do that? Had drugs on him, too.”

“Wow, man,” I said. Sammy had the sort of personality that put one in mind of a child; he always seemed to be discovering conversation. Like a child, he never picked up on the difference between lies and honesty.

“Yeah,” said Sammy.

“See you around, Sammy,” I said. I was late for an appointment with my physician. Sammy tended to hang out in one of two places: the hospital and the food bank. Together, those two places gave him

everything he apparently needed: human interaction and sustenance. I would often volunteer at the food bank and, before my frequent trips to the hospital had started up, that had been just about enough of a Sammy dose for me.

"Yeah," said Sammy. I gave him a grin and edged past into the hospital waiting room. "Do you know him?" I heard him ask a middle-aged lady who had come up the walk behind me. "He's a good guy. He helps a lot."

"Why doesn't he talk to one of you?" I asked my god as I waited for my turn at the admissions desk.

"I was about to commend you on your charitable character," said my god.

"Well, I sure don't mind helping him out now and then, if I can, but why doesn't he spend some of that babble on one of you?"

"I'm not sure," said my god. "All I can tell you is that he has never spoken to me."

"Downside of a pantheon," I said. Through a window, I saw Sammy make an unsuccessful grab for someone else's hand, and turn the gesture into a gracious unseen wave. As he did, I noticed an old, yellow bandage on his hand where his index finger ought to have been. "Was he in the war?" I asked my god.

"He didn't talk to me back then, either," said my god. "I suspect he talks to you more than he does to any of us."

After my appointment, I stopped at the hospital's cafeteria for a couple cups of coffee. As I had expected, Sammy was still hanging around the front door. He was picking at the cigarette stubs in the waist-high ashtray, experimenting with putting some of them in his mouth. I held out one of the coffees. "Hey, Sammy," I said.

He took the coffee and saluted me with it a

couple of times. "Hey," he said. "I don't drink coffee much, anymore, no. But it's the thought that counts." He took a big, scalding gulp and grinned at me.

"What's up with your finger?" I asked him.

"It's good, it's good," he said, putting the wounded hand into one of the pockets of his army-green coat. Before he got it hidden, though, I got a glimpse of bright-red blood leaking through the bandage; the cut was fresh. "It's good," he said again. He may have meant the coffee.

I gave him a nod in lieu of a wave and said, "See you at the handouts, Sammy."

"All right, take care," he said. I think he repeated it under his breath. As I drove home, I talked with my god. A while back, I noticed a tendency in myself not to talk with him unless I was also doing something else. I would chop firewood and talk to god; I would watch TV and talk to god; I would write in my journal and talk to god. At bedtime, when other people say their prayers and get a little advice on how to improve the following day, I would not talk to god, and he would not talk to me.

That night, I asked about the war, which led to a discussion of the necessity of violence, which was followed by an argument on the relative value of human beings. My god was gentle in his words, but I could hear a near boil in his tone. "You all have different values," he said. "Empirically divined, but only for us, since you lack the necessary skills."

"How much am I worth?" I asked as I put on my pajamas.

"You are worth my time," said my god, after a slight pause. The heat left his voice, and I bundled myself in a cocoon of heavy blankets.

When I got to the food bank the next morning there was already a crowd out front. The director of the bank often plead for orderly lines, but he never got anywhere.

I edged my way toward the front door, as politely as possible. Normally, the crowd was only too eager to let me pass through, seeing my presence as another step toward a meal; but today, there seemed to be another sort of hunger altogether driving them. A couple regulars got me with their elbows and grumbled at me to keep out of the way. I felt as if I were fighting to the stage at a concert.

Sammy was the object of the crowd's attention. When I emerged from the press of bodies, he grinned at me. "Did you hear about the Ward kid?" he asked.

"Hey, Sammy," I said.

"He got locked in a forest, yeah. His dad did it to him." His eyes were bloodshot and yellow just above the lids. He looked as if he had been rubbing grit into his tear ducts, all the red, scraped skin on his cheeks.

"You feeling all right?" I asked.

"He pissed on the wall," said someone behind me. "Gonna snap," said someone else.

"He cheated on a test," said Sammy. Then, in one movement, he spun to face the brick wall and flung his left arm across it. With his other hand, he pulled a wide cleaver from inside his army-green jacket. Before I could do much more than realize my blood had gone cold, he brought the knife down on his outstretched wrist. Three sounds came up at once: metal on brick, on flesh, and on bone. He screamed, pulled his good hand back and let it swing again. This time, I only heard metal on brick.

My startled muscles carried me toward him, but I tripped over the curb and went down. Sammy kept flailing with the cleaver, raising it only scant inches before smashing it into the wall, over and over, as if

the number of swings were important. He must have passed out before reaching his goal, because as I reached him he toppled over into my arms, and I saw tears of frustration in his eyes, different from tears of pain in that they dry much slower and seem to glitter much more sharply in overcast light.

A few days later I had another appointment at the hospital. I came in a little early so I could swing by Sammy's room. When I asked after him at the nurse's station, the ward clerk said, "Thank you, god. He's sure in need of a friendly voice; he's worn out all the good humor 'round here."

"She's been praying for someone to distract him," said my god as I made my way down the hall toward Sammy's room. Then, with a note of pride, he added, "I didn't figure you needed telling."

The smell of sick exhalations coming from each room combined with the natural vertigo my meds gave me to leave a solid headache. It felt like a brick was resting at the top of my spine.

Sammy was just coming out of his room as I arrived. His gown didn't fit him well, and his feet were only half-in a pair of hospital-provided slippers. He was holding a brown paper lunch sack in his hand. "I threw up some," he said, holding the bag out toward me.

"The nurse will probably want to measure it," I said, taking it from him.

"Well, they can't," said Sammy. "You're a good guy," he added, as if it were slightly less important.

"You look a little pale, Sammy," I said. "Let's sit down, yeah?"

"Okay," he said. I set the bag of vomit down on the floor as soon as his back was turned.

His room was large enough for two beds, but his was the only one. I could see scuff marks on the tile where the other bed had rested. The rest of the space was strewn with his clothes: shirt, torn socks, brown corduroys, tighty-whities, and the big green coat. They were spread out to cover the maximum area. It smelled as if the air hadn't been stirred since Sammy arrived.

"They couldn't get your hand back," I said. I leaned against the wall. There was something comforting about the smell in the room; it was almost like being in the presence of something much older than myself.

"Think positive," said Sammy. "Are you thinking positive?"

"I try and keep it up," I said. "You having any problems? Anything I can help with. I can sneak you some coffee."

"Hey," said Sammy. It sounded as if he had just realized I was in the room. "I've got a question."

"What's that?"

"Where is my soul?" he asked.

I hesitated. "I'm sure your god could answer that a whole lot better than I can," I said. "I'm not even that clear on my own physiology."

"It's not a place," said my god. I repeated it to Sammy. "It's hardly even a thing."

Sammy stroked the bandage that covered the stump of his missing hand. "Cool," he said. "All right. Think positive."

"Sorry, man," I said. "I guess that's not a lot of help. Ain't much to be clear on, even." Sammy nodded, bobbing his neck kind of like a quail. "Got an easier one for me?" I asked.

"No sir, all right," said Sammy. "It's good to see you, hey. I'll see you around." He sat down on his bed and kicked off his slippers. His feet didn't quite meet

the floor.

“Likewise,” I said.

The following weekend I had two hundred packages to put together so the food bank regulars would have something special for the upcoming holidays. Cans of spaghetti, small boxes of cereal with prizes inside, some ribbon. It was a big job, but I had somebody to pass the time with.

Thanks to the situation with Sammy, my god was in a lamenting mood.

“There was a time when we gods had power,” he said. “We had our words, yes, but our words could do much more than just spark the neurons in the brains of our worshipers. We could conquer armies with a breath; we could lift mountains with a half-realized whim; we could lift the spirits of the downtrodden as lifting water from a stream in cupped hands.”

“So, what happened?” I asked. My god had often told me this story, but he told it like a gently senile grandfather; details changed at every telling, and each new wrinkle to the story made me feel closer to his true, unedited self.

“What happens to a muscle that goes unused? What happens to a brain submerged in mindless activity? Our power atrophied. We had once been timeless; then, one morning, it was as though we had been pushed from a bridge over the river of time and were now adrift within it — cold, restless, weary in motion.

“We used to feed you as we would the fish, suspended above your strange and uncomfortable world. Now we were among you, held distant and weak by some force — or lack of force — that we did not understand.” He pulled all other sounds out of my

hearing, filling my head with silence. It was his equivalent of a sigh. "We learned, though," he continued. "Our power left us because we no longer needed to use it. Not for you, mad people though you are."

His long monologue added a comfortable dissonance to my work, like an invisible hand keeping the curve of my emotion from exceeding its bounds.

"That sort of power wouldn't be unwelcome, now," I said. "Cut down on my medical bills. In fact, I can't think of a single person who would refuse a miracle."

"Unfortunately, you do not decide what is necessary, for we gods or for yourselves. That is a balance given over to some science that you are ill-equipped to test." Silence rolled through my head, again. "Miracles are slow wonders, kid," he said. "They're happening, but their birth and growth are far more deliberate than you are capable of seeing."



I read about Sammy's latest episode in the weekend paper. The dry, journalist prose put a welcome distance between the experience and me. "...white male in mid-thirties reported causing a disturbance on 300 block of Old Elm." Just a few blocks down from the food bank. I had wondered why Sammy hadn't shown up for our holiday celebration; I had also wondered about the sirens I had heard, but not so hard.

"He prays to a loner deity," said my god. I was driving to the hospital to visit Sammy. After the doctors got him stabilized, they had moved him to the mental wing. I had one ribboned package left over from the party, and an empty prescription in need of a refill.

“Which one?” I asked my god.

“Not one I’m familiar with,” said my god. “He refuses to speak with me.”

“Sammy or the loner?”

“Both.”

I parked my car and shoved open the door. There was a solid wind moving over the asphalt like a brusque man in a slow-moving line, all low grumbles and thick skin. The sky was purple and seemed close, as if I could reach up and grab a fistful of lightning.

“Can they reattach his leg?” I asked as I bundled myself, head down, to the front entrance. Inside, the air was thin and smelled of new carpet.

“No,” said my god. “His cut was too ragged and too slow. There was nothing the surgeons could do to save it.”

“That’s a sort of power,” I mused. “Defying the gifts of talented men.”

“That is not the sort of power that would rob us of ours,” my god replied.

Sammy was sleeping off some pain meds when a nurse showed me to his room. He wasn’t classified as dangerous, but his leg and good arm were strapped loosely to the frame of his bed. The straps meant for his other limbs curled limply on the tile floor.

I sat down and waited for him to wake up. I felt my god retreat from my mind. Thunder shook the distance, and crossed miles to growl weakly at the window.

I thought about the stories of great, fickle gods of the past — told to me in deadpan by my god — who demanded sacrifice and rewarded it with disinterest. I thought about the unassuming races of history who submitted their wills to the weather and the seasons, believing that there were gods there who would take their offerings and transform them into longevity. I wondered if it might have been a temptation, to

surrender control, like a child in its mother's arms.

"Hey, friend." Sammy rolled his whole head to face me. "What's your name again?"

"Come on, man," I said. "You remember me."

Sammy showed me all his teeth. They were yellow and jagged and did a poor job of hiding his tongue. "I'm asking the wrong questions," he said.

I smiled. I had a good smile, since I had to use it a lot. Some of the outcasts who would come by the food bank were in such a slur of alcohol, you couldn't make head or tails of them. All you could do was smile. I had begun to think of my smile as its own word in the language; it changed its meaning based on inflection and, every so often, it dropped right out of my vocabulary, like when you can't remember a word that means "uneducated" but you know it starts with an S.

It didn't matter what I thought my smile was. Sammy was deaf to it; he rolled over on his side, showing me his back. I tried some other words.

"Folks miss you at the bank, man," I said. "I'm supposed to take back good news to 'em. Doctors gonna let you go any time soon?"

Sammy grunted. I could see his jaws working, bulging out the skin of his cheeks. I slumped down a little further in my seat. I'd seen his sort of posture all the time in my volunteer work. He was giving up. It was a weighted silence, and seemed a reluctance to respond for fear of being lifted bodily from a comfortable hole. I had often seen it happen when a co-volunteer asked a customer to talk about managing what little money the latter had. I hadn't once seen a customer gladly hand over the decisions that guided their few bills to the educated suggestion of a volunteer. It was about control; they would cling to the tiniest sphere of influence, and I had seen it many times pop like a soap bubble.

Funny, though. I had never pegged Sammy as the master-of-his-own-destiny type. He was always far too generous with his thoughts, his history, his hand shakes.

He made a noise, something kind of like words.

“What was that, Sammy?”

He rolled to face me. Blood stained his chin like a red goatee; he spit a hunk of flesh from between his teeth. It landed on the sheets with the sound of heavy rain. It was the tip of his tongue. “Where is my soul?” he asked in a clotted voice, indistinct as if he had lost interest in speech.

After that, I did a little giving up of my own. I had seen plenty of men and women at the nadir of their lives, but they had all known it. Sammy's bemused ignorance of the reasons for his self-destruction put a distance between us that I was hesitant to cross back over.

That's part of a lie. Sammy didn't make the distance; I did. I walked out of his room. I rolled my eyes when the nurse asked how he was doing. I tried to spin my mind away from him by counting the seconds between lightning and thunder.

That lasted for as long as the storm did. I had other things to occupy my time — volunteer work, my health, the job that paid the bills — but I kept coming back to Sammy.

“You have taken your responsibility as far as you need,” said my god. “There are others whose needs are much clearer.” He told me about a few; the ones who had talked to him, at least.

“Why not work a miracle,” I said. I had meant it as a joke, but by the time the words reached my tongue they tasted much more bitter. My mouth

twisted. My god couldn't see it. He backed away and left me in peace for a while.

I passed the next couple of weeks with the inside of my head feeling like a desert. I could sense the natural mutation of the world around me, but it seemed no more important than the shifting of dunes. When I closed my eyes, even the colors there seemed flat and desaturated, like a canvas unfit to paint on. My responsibility to Sammy had not been fulfilled; there was a contract between us, reaffirmed every time I stopped to listen to him. Breaking that contract would leave me stranded in the desert sensation, which is not so much devoid of water as empty of life.

My god was the one to break the silence. "You do the things that we can not, you know," he said one morning as I brushed my teeth. "Your simple handouts are small miracles. Envy is not an emotion becoming of a deity, but perhaps we approach it. The act of raising a loaf of bread in thanksgiving is your greatest power."

I spit toothpaste into the sink. "I don't understand the direction of my life," I said.

"Life has no direction," said my god. "Life is not a journey; it is a shape."

"I don't quite understand the shape my life is in," I said.

"Then I am fully jealous," said my God. "You should be grateful for the chance to understand, because that makes times like this all the more potent."

"Times like what?" I asked, just as the phone rang.

"Your doctor," said my god, and I could hear the play of good humor in his voice.

A little thrill sprang up in my chest. I picked up the phone.

"Good news!" crowed my doctor on the other

end. "Did he share it with you?"

"Not yet," I said. My heart slowed.

"Then it's my pleasure to tell you that, based on your test results from the last two months, it seems your illness is in remission."

My heart pumped a salve through my veins, and I felt the shape of the world begin to soften. I felt a relief akin to that I imagined would be felt by a lottery winner; it was sudden, unexpected, and I had no immediate idea of what to do with it.

"Don't think this lets you off the service hook," my god said, and my doctor laughed at something only he could hear.

"Why did you let him tell me?" I asked after I hung up the phone.

"I don't abuse what power I have," said my god.



When I went back to visit Sammy, I felt buoyed by my good news. My good intention — the one I pinned down in words — was to share some of my mood with him, to see what minor joy might slough from me to him.

"Don't," said my god. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions which were not realized."

I didn't listen to him. There was still an indefinable distance between us, and I felt a push and pull in our conversation that hadn't been there before. The only image I could come up with as metaphor was that of a fly testing the binding of a spider's web, and so that image recurred often at the sound of his voice. "He deserves as many miracles as I do," I said.

The hospital had been able to keep him from losing any more of his parts, but I wasn't fully prepared to see him again after having stashed him at the back of my mind. He looked thin from

underfeeding, and his body couldn't quite square up with his bed. His head pulled to one side, and his stumps of arm and leg broke all hope of symmetry.

"Don't," said my god as I paused outside the door.

"I don't understand why not," I said.

Perfect silence fell around me. "I said that I do not abuse what power I have," said my god. "Had I the desire, I could ball your emotions up and play with them like a cat with a toy, but I haven't that desire."

I stepped back from Sammy's door and sat down on a nearby bench. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"Your mood is your life, the lens by which you perceive the shapes of everything. Your mood belongs to me, held entirely in the realm of your mind."

"I can choose to be happy without your interference," I said.

"That is an example I wouldn't expect you to pick," said my god. The silence came in, once more, and then my head was filled with his insistent words. If my time earlier had been a desert, this felt like a swamp, all curled decay and thick, complex patterns inside my eyes. "I have found the deity to whom Sammy speaks. He is a child god, a new birth, though old enough to your perception, and he is petty as his youth describes. He spins cruelty about him like carnival sugar, clotted and shapeless. He claims an insatiable curiosity, but my fellow gods do not believe that there is any motivation less than exercising a thoughtless power over the poor souls that trust him to be their guide."

I sat back against the wall and let my head clear. "You're taking advantage of him."

"I am not," said my god.

I breathed out a lungful and was slow pulling it back in. "And to think I was in such a good mood this morning." I rose and entered Sammy's room. I felt my

god withdraw, leaving noise where there had been silence.

Sammy cracked open his eyes to look at me, then slid his focus toward the blank wall. "Hey," he said. "It's good to see you, man. Yeah." His words sounded drunk, coming off his ruined tongue.

"Hey, Sammy," I said. I pulled a chair over to his bedside. Neither of us said anything for a while, but you couldn't hold it against us. After a while, I wasn't sure if Sammy even remembered I was in the room. I cleared my throat and asked, "Do you believe in a god?" It sounded stupid to ask.

"I hear voices sometimes," said Sammy. His skin was gray as storm clouds. He coughed and then moaned, trying to lick his lips with the ragged line of his tongue. His lips were chapped and splotched with a deep red where he had been chewing. It looked painful; it looked like the least of his pain. I bent over him, wet my own lips, and kissed him lightly. He stared at the ceiling.

"Sometimes I hear voices, too," I said, sitting back in my chair.

A young man in a nurse's uniform rapped politely on the door and came in. "Hi there, Sammy," he said with an affected brightness. "Sorry, but it's time to check on your vitals again."

"It's not a good idea," said Sammy. He scowled, as if unsatisfied with how the words had come out. "It's not a good idea," he repeated.

"Well, we've got to know how you're doing, so we can keep you healthy."

Sammy started to thrash around on his bed. The nurse gave me a look of long suffering. "Want me to give you a hand?" I asked.

"Can't do blood pressure, now," said the nurse. "Just hold his head still while I take his temperature."

I got on my knees next to Sammy's bed and took

his head in both my hands. His skin was rough, unshaven, and blotched with sweat. He stared at me and calmed slightly, our pupils reflected one another in the faint light. The nurse bent over and pushed a thermometer into Sammy's ear. A short beep, and then he was done. "Ninety-nine," he said. "Looks like the antibiotics are working, Sammy."

Sammy didn't say anything. He just stared at me. "Where is my soul?" he asked.

"I'll be back to check on your blood pressure, okay, Sammy?" said the nurse. "Thanks," he said to me. I smiled at him and pulled my hands away from Sammy's cheeks.

"Where is my soul?" asked Sammy. He didn't break his gaze away from me.

I reached up and tapped my temple. "It's here," I said. I leaned over and rested my fingers on his. "It's right here. Keep that, all right? Let them take everything else off you. Let them scream themselves hoarse." His eyes unfocused. I cupped my hands over his ears. The nerves and tendons all up my arms shuddered with repressed energy, as if they wanted to act out all the things I couldn't figure how to say. "Not these," I said. I started to shake him, but I heard his neck pop and that scared me back against my chair.

Slowly, Sammy raised his one good hand to his head, index finger and thumb sticking out like a playground gun.

A BOY IN A CORNER WITH CHALK IN HIS EYES

“I knew something was wrong when the gun spit flowers instead of bullets,” said Troy. He was sitting in the grass on a hill overlooking what might have been his home town. There was a zeppelin drifting overhead like a cloud, blocking out the sun. “Not flowers, exactly,” Troy went on. “Just some green vegetable thing. Turned out that any sudden impact in that version of the world was a catalyst for plant growth. Like, instead of sound, you got broccoli.”

“How unusual,” said father Van. He was tall and stooped and covered head-to-toe in a brown fur, thin as a boy's first beard. In Troy's old world he had been short, stocky, and bald.

“That's not even the worst of it,” said Troy, tearing up handfuls of grass, like a child unsupervised, and letting them blow away in the wind.

Father Van gave an animal grunt and sat down

across from Troy. "What is the worst?" he asked.

Troy stared down at the priest, and then out over the valley. "Sometimes it's easy, getting back into things," he said. "Sometimes not much is different. At least the sky's the right color here." He looked up, as if to prove the point, but the zeppelin was blocking his view. An unfamiliar flag decorated its bullet-shaped body. Troy had been a pilot for the Air Force back home; it had been the excitement and thrum of broken air against his ears that had drawn him into the cockpit. He figured he wouldn't have the patience to drive a zeppelin, at the mercy of the wind instead of being its ruin.

"I'm glad that you approve," said father Van, scratching one of his legs with the other. "But I have two appointments yet this afternoon, and, as I can recall, you have not told me anything that requires absolution. Do you consider harming yourself?"

"No, father," said Troy. "Do you remember— do you know Deseret?"

"I am not qualified to absolve sexual sins, mister Danagog. Cardinal—"

"It's nothing like that," said Troy.

"Then what?" asked father Van. When Troy didn't answer immediately, the priest stood and brushed dust off his pants.

"You married us," said Troy, blowing a handful of grass seeds into the wind. Some of them got stuck in father Van's fur.

Father Van picked out the seeds and crushed them between his fingernails. He gave Troy a look under arched eyebrows. "Should I be apologizing? Are there problems between you and—?"

"Deseret. No," said Troy. "No, I don't know what is between me and Deseret; I don't know how much of it there is, either. That first time, with the gun flowers, I stood up, baffled. My skin was twitching like

I was hooked up to a current, kinda the way you feel when a muscle spasm jolts you out of a doze, you know. I went out into the kitchen, where Deseret had been making dinner, and found a strange woman there. Deseret was five-foot-nine. This woman was, uh, height-challenged.”

“A runt,” offered father Van. He made a gentle turn and began to walk down the hill in the direction of the steeple. Troy pushed himself to his feet and followed. At their walking pace, they remained always in the shadow of the zeppelin.

“Yeah,” said Troy. “I can't tell you how strange it felt, right in my skin, and deeper.”

“I'd rather you didn't,” said father Van. “I am quickly turned to nightmares.”

“Of course,” said Troy; then he laughed. “I'm sorry,” he offered father Van as explanation, though the priest hadn't seemed curious. “It's just little things that shock me, sometimes. Not even the fact that you're covered in fur—” Father Van snorted “—not that there's anything wrong with that. But it's that the father Van I used to know sponsored Brahmton's yearly Romero/Raimi marathon.” Father Van continued on, a minute shrug his only response. Troy caught up to him and buried his mirth. “We were married for a year,” said Troy, evenly.

“What happened?” asked father Van. They had reached the chapel. Troy stood with his hands in his pockets as father Van kicked at a thistle by the door, then retrieved his keys.

“I just about died,” said Troy.

“The gun,” said father Van, dipping his paw into a font of holy water and making a circular design on his chest.

“It was an accident,” said Troy, dipping his own fingers in the water and making the sign of the cross. “I had been cleaning my pistol—my brother-in-law

and I had been down at the range earlier—while Deseret fixed the steaks. She called me to come in and unwrap what was left of our wedding cake, you know, from all that tinfoil.”

“Of course,” said father Van.

Troy got the impression the priest wasn't listening anymore, but he kept on, anyway. “So I wasn't done cleaning, and I hadn't pulled out the old clip, and somehow my thumb slipped onto the trigger, and—” Troy shrugged. “Boom. Flowers.”

“And the runt.”

“Yeah,” said Troy. “It was a boneheaded thing to do, I know. Went out to the kitchen, and nothing was the same. That was a year ago.”

Father Van nodded and disappeared into his office for a moment. Troy sat down on a pew and stared up at the altar. It was made of slat-wood panels painted a marbled green. On his world, the altar had been white plaster. He thought about how Deseret's dress had camouflaged her when they stood there to be married, how she had made him forget to blink.

“I have just clapped my hands to be sure,” said father Van, emerging from his office with a book in his hand, “but saw no resultant vegetation.”

“No,” said Troy, shaking off his reverie and standing. “That was in another world.”

“Ah,” said father Van. He thought for a moment, and then continued. “I believe you may have chosen poorly to whom you confess.”

“I couldn't take that world,” said Troy. “Not right off the bat. I went to the bridge, and I swear I didn't even think about it. I jumped at low-tide.”

“I take it your efforts failed,” said father Van.

“I don't think so,” said Troy. “I think, in some universe, it worked just like I planned. But I didn't stay around to see it. Some other poor me got splattered in

the mud flats.”

“Thank you for that image,” said father Van. There was a series of shouts from outside, like those of children on a playground. “My next appointment,” said father Van. “Or, I should say, my first appointment.” He put his arm on Troy's shoulder and steered him toward the door. Just as he was reaching for the handle, the door flew open. There were two figures on the steps; the one holding the door screamed quickly and then covered its mouth. Troy couldn't tell what gender either of the figures were; they wore the same trousers and loose shirts as father Van.

“I apologize, father Van,” said the one at the door. “Are we early?”

“No, missus Take, mister Take,” said father Van, nodding at them both. “You're right on time. Excuse me for just one moment. Go on in; I won't be much longer” He grabbed Troy firmly by the elbow and escorted him down the stairs. Once they had passed the Takes, Troy heard a low whisper, like the crack of a whip. It was mister Take. “You need to be more careful,” he hissed. Missus Take responded, but father Van had accelerated and left her words behind.

“Well, mister Danagog, I appreciate your coming to see me,” said father Van. “If you'll allow me a moment of candor, though, I will say that it is disheartening to see someone maltreat religion as you do, and I do not find it funny.”

“I'm sorry,” said Troy. His lips had a natural curve in the corners, and even when somber he looked as though he wore the ghost of a smile. “I just wanted to talk to a familiar . . .” he trailed off, searching for the right word. He decided on, “Name.”

“I'm glad I could be of service,” said father Van. “But if I leave the Takes unsupervised for very long, they're liable to swear in the chapel.”

“Wait a sec, father. I do have a confession,” said Troy.

Father Van sighed, and to Troy it sounded like a horse's neigh. “A direct confession?” asked father Van. Troy nodded. “A confession to be made under the sky, in the sight of God?” Troy nodded again and allowed his natural smile to broaden. Father Van ignored it. “Let's hear it, then,” said the priest.

“Bless me, father, for I have sinned—” began Troy.

Father Van shook his head. “What is this? I can no more bless you than can you bless me.”

“It's a custom on my Earth,” said Troy.

“Never mind,” said father Van. He glanced up at the sky. The zeppelin had made a slow curve around Brahmton and now was heading East; it would pass over them again in a few minutes. “What is your confession?”

“I killed a man,” said Troy. Father Van said nothing. “Are you going to call the police?”

“Depending on the circumstances, I may be obliged to,” said father Van. “Though I might sooner call them after waking from a bad dream. Was this homicide also an accident?” asked father Van.

“Nope,” said Troy. “This was on purpose. After the gun and the bridge, I felt like a gag, like some trick pulled on other people. I went to a bar. In this world—the world in which the surface tension of water was enough to gently support my fall—the bars served this stuff that was like syrup, but burned all the way down. I couldn't swallow it fast enough. I don't guess I was thinking clearly when I picked a fight with the guy in the corner. I felt like a sick man, like there was bile in my throat. The guy wasn't doing anything; he was just sitting there with a pint and an open book. I asked him what he was reading, and he said something like, There is a balm in Gilead. Didn't even

look up. That just pissed me off, like I can't even tell you. I mean, what was wrong with this planet? No common decency.

“Something was creeping up into my skull, like the syrup had gotten into my blood, and my own heart was pumping it where it didn't belong. I knocked the guy's pint away, and then he looked up. He would've looked familiar to you— or, no, he wouldn't have. Not to you. But he did to me.

“Father Van,’ I said. ‘What are you doing here?’ He closed his book and said something small; I don't remember what.” Troy cast his eyes up and to the left and took a deep breath. “His was the first familiar face I had encountered, really. The first time I saw that in a separate universe, a parallel evolution had occurred, and must have occurred in countless other iterations. I say it calmly, now, I know, but the concept—it felt more like fantasy—hit me like some needle sinking through my skull. It was sharp and cold and I wanted to yank it out. I wanted to scrub him out, retribution for doing this to me. I didn't blame him for the whole problem, just for giving me ideas. I was in no shape for ideas.” The zeppelin's shadow crawled down the lane, leaping over kick stones and smoothing down the summer colors. “I did it with my fists,” said Troy. “I beat him to death with my fists, and I hardly even noticed. Like slowly boiling water for a frog, it started out benign. Who could believe he had the power to kill a man with his fists? I mean, look at them.” Troy held out his fists, so they go hit first by the zeppelin's shadow.

With the sun blocked out, the temperature dropped in an instant. “Wait,” said father Van. “Wait until God can see you again.” The priest stared at Troy, long and unblinking. Troy couldn't guess the other man's emotion. The zeppelin passed overhead, its only effect intangible. Troy blinked when the sun

came out of eclipse.

“You do not belong in this place,” said father Van. Something in his voice was burning. “I can not absolve you of the guilt of murder; to do so would require you to have a contrite spirit, or for me to find you worthy of absolution. Neither are present.”

“Don't take it personally,” said Troy.

Father Van turned on his heel and strode back toward the church. Troy trailed along behind.

“I need your advice,” said Troy.

“You need nothing from me,” said father Van. “And I wish you would leave. Whatever world you like to live in, it does not overlap with mine.”

“You're absolutely right, father,” said Troy. “A Deseret is out there, I know, in a world in which everything has evolved the same as on my Earth, except maybe she never met me, or maybe I never took up shooting. But I don't want her in this place. I prefer my women somewhat more shaved. Truth be told, I really just wanted to see what you were like in this world, if you were in this world, and to apologize.”

“Yes, well, I feel no more dead than usual, so your apology is unnecessary.”

“Not for that,” said Troy. “Behind your back, after our ceremony, I said you had a voice like Tweety Bird would have if he huffed helium. Your neck was a lot shorter in that world. I had to fight not to laugh all through the vows. *Until death us do part*,” mocked Troy, his voice cracking.

They were at the chapel door. Troy could hear the Takes arguing inside; there was a growl of frustration and then the tinkling of glass. Father Van paused with one hand on the latch. “It seems to me,” he said, “that deliberate actions are much easier to take back than are accidents. The Proverbs say that we must pay in fair measure for that which we take from the world, be

it a wife or a loaf of bread. I could grant you a divorce,” the priest continued, opening the door. “But I do not believe I can help you with your loose tongue, nor your other . . . problems.” He ducked inside before Troy had a chance to respond.

Troy spent a few moments just gazing around at the strange, familiar geography of Brahmton, the hills, the brown fields, the buildings all white and concrete. The town was motionless, playing dead. Everything moved too slowly. Troy watched the zeppelin as it disappeared over the hills, heading toward Florida. He grew tired of standing still before the ship slid out of sight.

“Until death us do part,” he said, squinting up at the sun.



There was a desert; there was no wind. The sand was packed hard as glass. No amount of stamping on Troy's part resulted in a footprint, so he walked uncertain, perhaps in circles, perhaps in a sharp line. Each option seemed equally pointless, after a time. There was no sun; the sky glowed like flesh pressed up against a flash light, with no point of origin. Red sky in the morning, red sky at night, sailors take warning, and sailor's delight.

After some time, Troy felt his mind cave in, like a star collapsing. The gravity of his brain became unbearable. Memories, most of them caught up in words, tried to escape—he could feel them crawl through his skin—but they never got far. The strongest, the harshest, those born of hardship, made it as far as the open air before succumbing to the pull. Troy wished they wouldn't try. As they entered the horizon of his thoughts, he heard them all again.

“It is useful as a tool for the purging of guilt,” said father Van. “This land is my land. It is an active response to a passive sin. We carefully screen our visitors for responses of

pleasure. Security is standing by. Would you like to buy a ticket? There are demons to your right."

"God has a great capacity for destruction," said Haim. He was reclining in the trench, pillowing his head against a chunk of asphalt, drinking coffee out of a looted thermos. Troy sat nearby, cross-legged, very carefully cleaning his sidearm. He had enlisted with the infantry by way of sneaking into a makeshift barracks at night and claiming an unused bunk. War isn't hell, he had reasoned. Death is hell, or at least the first step on the path, and war simply a massively efficient means of inflicting death. Death not being much of a concern to Troy, he thought the actual fighting might be kind of fun, and he would get to meet some interesting people.

He had met Haim during an impromptu chapel service in the basement of a besieged office building. Jewish in both ethnicity and religion, Haim seemed always fascinated with the concept of a creator, and spoke of his convictions as though they had been validated by the good Lord himself, perhaps with a large, red, rubber stamp. He was a delight to bicker with. Troy might once have called it surreal, arguing semantics of the pharaoh's words to Moses while flipping dense-weave protective mats over live grenades, but no longer. Even Dali turned his art to habit.

"It's man," said Troy. "Man has the capacity for destruction."

"God has it in him, too," said Haim. "He knew about nukes long before Canada made 'em."

"God's unstuck in time," said Troy. "That's a bad example."

"If he can imagine it, he might as well have made

it," said Haim.

"First time I saw my wife, I daydreamed what amounted to raping her," said Troy.

"The feminists would have it that that's just what you've done, if you married the girl." Haim grinned. His teeth were dark at the gums from chewing on tobacco. "Listen to us, man; we go at it worse than atheists versus agnostics. I didn't know you had a wife."

"Yep," said Troy.

"Where's she hiding?"

"I have no idea," said Troy. "I'll find her sooner or later." Something about the rumble of the mortars in the distance, and the mutant woodpecker sound of friendly assault rifles, made Troy feel introspective. He finished messing with his gun and set it carefully down in the mud, its barrel pointing away from him. "I think God's got a great imagination," he said. "I mean, who'd have guessed that the biggest threat to our nation would have come from Montreal?"

Haim gave him a confused smile. "Well, ever since the French—"

"Where I'm from, I mean," said Troy. "I'm not up on your history around here." Haim nodded and chewed thoughtfully on some cud. "That doesn't just take imagination, that takes a sense of humor. Same kind of humor that puts me in these places that look and sound so familiar. Every time, it's something I know I've seen before, like seeing some nameless actor in a show, and trying for hours to remember what else you've seen that he was in. And not one of these worlds has Deseret. It's kind of sick. Kind of a sick humor. I don't think it's getting better."

Haim swallowed and spit. He held out a leaf of tobacco. "You want some, man? It'll help you come down."

"I'm fine," said Troy.

Something landed in the trench in front of Haim. With the flair of a magician, he flipped one of the mats overtop it. There was a muffled explosion and a few tendrils of dark smoke leaked out from under the mat's edge. It hadn't given Haim enough time to think of what he wanted to say, so there was a stretch of silence, or rather, a stretch in which neither of the two men spoke.

"You treat the universe like it's God's alone, man," said Haim. "That's just depressing. This is our place. You can run for a thousand miles without running into God."

"Yeah," said Troy.

"You've got to take what you want from the world, because God's gonna dole it out to some guy who will use it, otherwise. There's a cliché about it; maybe a parable, too."

"Yeah," said Troy. His head was lolling.

"Now you're just agreeing with me," said Haim. "You aren't listening."

"What?" said Troy, snapping his eyes up.

Haim shook his head and grunted out a laugh. "You, my friend, are a monkey in the classroom. You've got all the tools of learning in front of you, but can't figure how to use them."

"Are they edible?" asked Troy.

"Look at 'em," said Haim, rising to a crouch and peering over the lip of the trench. Troy joined him. The remaining buildings looked like rotten teeth; the ground looked as if it had been chewed on. There were bodies, and sections of bodies, lying near craters. Troy started to count the bodies; he may as well have tried to count stars. The repetitive nature of the task made his eyes droop, but his brain kept firing, imagining a new world for each full body.

"I'm not sure I can take much more of this," he said, more from his brain than his eyes, and sat back in

the trench. Further down the line, somebody was shouting orders. A monstrous growl came from across the bleeding gums of the city, quiet at first, but building in a crescendo of some hunger.

“You won't have to,” said Haim. His head jerked back, his arms forward. He looked as though he were giving a belly laugh. A cone of what looked like chocolate pudding erupted from his helmet, coalesced into individual drops, and plopped into the mud, where they promptly vanished. Haim's body continued in the direction of his head, sinking against the trench floor. His helmet slipped off. It bounced over to Troy, its momentum deceptive, like that of a rolling cannon ball. Troy reached out to stop it and felt his palm start to bleed. He lifted the helmet and turned it to see what had cut him. A seven-pointed, irregular star had gone nova dead center rear; its points reflected all the light there was to be had.

Somewhere, thought Troy, there is a world in which helmets are made of stronger stuff, or soldiers are. Somewhere, bullets are obsolete and have been replaced with . . . what? Try as he might, Troy couldn't imagine what might take the place of bullets. Fists, feet, gasses, and more; these tools had already been invented.

There was a desert; there was no sun. The featureless sky met the featureless Earth and, had it had any glimmer of intention, it would have dared Troy's imagination to make something—anything—of the perfect shapes. It was like being trapped inside an Easter egg, painted on the inside by a thin, persistent brush.

Troy had been walking for long enough that he had had to stop and sleep twice, but with no nightfall, no sunup, he couldn't be sure if he had slept for hours or minutes each time. His bare feet had formed blood blisters, which had popped. Any

hope he had of tracking his progress by the red splotches he left behind was sucked up, along with the blood itself, by the insatiable ground. Troy wondered if, next time he lay down, he would, too, be pulled under.

He tried not to sleep after that, instead just sitting and resting his legs when he felt the weariness rising in his bones like radiation. Without the rhythm of his feet beneath him, the voices escaping and falling back into his head were louder and impossible to ignore.

“You are like an ox,” said the man that Troy had never known. “Look at the flag. This land is my land. You march to that flag, and you don’t look at your feet. You hear me? Absolutely. Absolutely. The flag is your wife. If you can not walk a straight line. We value your service.”

Troy thought that maybe he should go to sleep, choke himself on the ground, and wake up elsewhere, or right here.



“You really let yourself go,” said Troy. He had been psyching himself up for it for the entire month since he had found Deseret and first visited her San Diego apartment.

“I’ve been on a diet,” said Deseret. “I love it.”

They were on the small deck her complex afforded, playing a game that reminded Troy of chess. He had to keep asking her how the pieces moved, but he would have had to do that with chess, too. She had music playing out of her bones, some choral piece that made each turn of the game that much more dramatic, as though staged.

“I used to be able to pick you up in one arm,” said Troy, capturing one of Deseret’s weaker pieces.

“Never,” said Deseret. “Stop trying to fake me out. I’m kicking your ass. Just suck it up.” She grinned. Troy thought that her lips looked like rubber, rubber that nothing ever bounced off of. He sat back and

stared at the game board. He wasn't sure he liked this world. It was a bit like how he imagined heaven would be: boring, flat, bright. Joy may come from selflessness, but satisfaction comes from sin.

"It's our anniversary," said Deseret, kicking at his shin under the table.

"What?" said Troy.

"We've been going out for two weeks," said Deseret.

"We haven't gone out, yet, Des," said Troy.

"You know what I mean." She gave him a hopeful smile and, when he didn't return it, moved her strongest piece. "It was two weeks ago when you—you know."

"Got drunk," said Troy.

"No," protested Deseret. She had a glare like a mother. "When you kissed me."

"I know what you meant," said Troy. He made a capture. "It was the same night."

One piece of music ended. Another began. "I always wanted a boy to pursue me," said Deseret. "Instead of the other way around."

"That's because you're lazy," said Troy.

Deseret kicked him under the table again, a little harder this time. "You know what I mean. It makes you feel worth something, because you are to someone." She put her hand on a piece, moved it, then moved it back to its original square and bit her lip. "I had a secret admirer in college," she said. "He—I think it was a he—sent me silk roses in the mail. Not a bouquet, never that many. Just one red, plastic rose in my campus mailbox every Wednesday for six months."

"That's a lot of money," said Troy. He had a good move coming up, and was impatient for Deseret to just commit her damn piece to action.

"Then they stopped coming," said Deseret. "One

week, there was one on a Thursday, and then after that, nothing. I was so bummed. Midterms were coming up, and I couldn't even concentrate on them, I was thinking so much about the smallest things that I had done, trying to decide which one, or string of ones, had stopped the flow of plastic roses."

"Probably a hidden camera crew; they got bored of watching you," said Troy. He wasn't looking at her, but he would have sworn he *heard* her sad smile; she sighed when she did it, and some reluctant curve of her lips bent the sound just so. She didn't say anything else. "I think you're right," said Troy. "I'm not sure—the calendars keep changing—but I think it's been a year."

"Since when?" asked Deseret. Troy didn't answer. She began to pout, to push her lower lip out. It looked like a pink caterpillar had settled on her mouth, or as if she had taken a whorish injection of collagen.

"Put that away," said Troy. She sort of giggled, and then did it.

"Why won't you tell me?" she asked him. "What happened a year ago?"

Troy laughed through his nose. A lot about this world seemed funny to him. He thought maybe it was the slapdash similarities between this and his first world; he thought maybe the atmosphere was full of nitrous oxide. "You're nothing like her," he said. "She was quiet and she had a laugh like a kitten's purr. She was a vegetarian—she was making the steaks for me—and she hated playing games." He stood up and turned away from the board. He faced the city and raised his hands as though presenting it to Deseret. "This— this isn't a heaven here, with you. This is purgatory, a place where work is rewarded by a diminishing torment. But even I don't believe that! There's no circle to the universe, no curve; I could keep going forever and never find my Deseret."

His voice was a hail of punches, each word its own discrete and weak wound, but compounded, like fists, they had the power to make her bleed; it was like the first gentle, distant rumble of artillery.

"I can't even pretend," he said. "You're fat and ugly and, once I'm gone, you'll cease to exist. Chew that up." He shoved away from the game board and leaned on the railing, head bowed. There was nothing penitent or humble about the posture. He was just trying to think of how long it might take him to reach the ground.

Behind him, strings swelled. "I wish," said Deseret, "that I had a thousand tongues to say, You don't deserve me."

"Yeah, well—" said Troy, and he jumped. His eyes were forced shut by the rush of air, the sting of tears. The wind in his ears died gently and he rubbed his sleeve across his lashes, wicking up the water, staining the fabric. He was still standing on Deseret's deck. The game board was still there. Bizarro Deseret was not.

All right, Troy thought. Who runs this place? A tiny magnet of boredom rested at the bottom of his thoughts, drawing the others down.



There was the desert; there was a wind. The hard-packed ground remained unmoving. A light smudge grew on the horizon, like a pool of melted, colorless tallow. The sky's hot breath went down Troy's neck, his sticky shirt, his eyes and throat. Particles of dust too fine to see dug into his skin like blown ice, but Troy's blood burned at the points of contact. He tried walking backwards, by the bare skin at the nape of his neck caught fire and he felt his shirt begin to tear along its seams. He raised his eyes and caught a glimpse of unnatural light on the horizon, back the way he had come. It looked as if

it came from a spotlight or a skyscraper.

He made an effort at cursing, but it came out as croaking. He thought that maybe he could run in the direction the wind was blowing, and thereby avoid the slashing of the crescendo storm. He made it four slow steps and then his legs gave out. He pulled his head against his thighs, presenting as little of himself to the wind as possible.

Voices echoed in and out of substance, driven through his skull by the combined forces of the storm and his own gravity.

"I have left five husbands behind," said Deseret. "And I left them all crying. From one end of this land to the other. I own fifteen percent of everywhere I've been. This land is my land. Four of them have cried when I left. Big, wet tears in the garden. Too much salt in the water. A bed of roses died. I've never been good with plants."



"My god," said Troy. "This place is incredible."

"It's funny," said Commander Beresford. "That's the word that everybody uses. First time I bring a guest up here, it's *incredible*. I'm starting to doubt my own trustworthiness." Beresford grinned at Troy, whose muscles were too limp to do anything but gape and slouch. The quick ascent felt as though it had shook his insides to water and pulp. "I'm glad you like it," said Beresford.

"I remember," said Troy. He paused for a long moment, his hands on the clear polymer that separated his body from the vacuum. "Washing out," he said. "I remember washing out of the program."

"Physical trials?" asked Beresford.

Troy shook his head. "Two tours, I proved I could handle anything from a chunk of Styrofoam on up to the flying villages. Spent four hours in the air on a paper plate, damn it. It was the psychiatric exam," he added. "Four hours in a chair—they ain't as

comfortable as you'd think—and that was it. Grounded. From space, anyway.”

“And from up here,” mused Beresford, “even the passenger airlines look like slugs.”

“Yeah,” said Troy. “Listen, I really have to thank you for showing me around.” There was a wash of hot blood through his forehead and he felt sour liquid crackling through his tear ducts. It wasn't a reaction he had predicted.

“Don't mention it,” said Beresford. He seemed to be debating whether or not to sit down. He ended up leaning against the bulkhead, inserting himself into Troy's peripheral vision. Troy's eyes had the look of polished ball bearings, damp and heavy. “When you were in the fourth grade,” said Beresford, “did your teacher put your names up on the board?”

“Like,” Troy coughed, “you mean like if we were misbehaving?”

“That's it,” nodded Beresford. “For my class it was first offense, name on the board; second offense, check mark by the name; third offense, circled check mark; fourth offense, sit facing the corner.”

“Fifth offense?” asked Troy.

“Bull whip to the groin,” said Beresford. “This one day, can't have been too long before Christmas, I was goofing around, showing off for a girl, and got my name on the board for spitting. Damn near twelve feet, I swear. The threat didn't bother me; I liked the way my name looked, all slapped up with chalk. So, I keep showing off, rocking my chair as far as it would go. Got the check mark for knocking little Frannie Calico over backward and spraining her finger. Then I got the circled check mark for saying the F-word. That day, I tell you, that day was all mine. Not another name up on the board.” Beresford waited for Troy to smile before continuing. “Fourth offense was me telling Frannie Calico her finger brace looked stupid. I

didn't think saying so was as bad as saying the F-word, but there you have it. The teacher scooped me up in his two big hands and dropped me on a stool with my back to the class.

“It so happened he got me set up right in front of the blackboard. No chalk was in reach, but the felt erasers were both close enough to grab. It was silent reading time, so even the teacher had his head down. I snapped up those erasers and just started beating the hell out of them, against each other. Raised this big old cloud of chalk dust. You like that smell?” Troy shook his head. “It's one of those smells that some people like, some people don't, like gasoline,” said Beresford. “Anyway, I looked like a ghost by the time the teacher wrenched those erasers out of my hands. I couldn't fight him off because I couldn't see. The chalk dust had drifted right into my eyes. Someone else was sobbing—maybe one of the girls at a desk near me, and the teacher, he said, See what you did? You made her cry.

“I got sent home. Developed a rash—turns out I was allergic to chalk dust. All over my body, these things like chicken pox itched like the dickens. It was miserable.

“It wasn't the first time I got sent home, so my parents had a meeting with the principal, who suggested counseling. I spent some time in one of those obnoxiously sadistic chairs you mentioned, age nine, exploring myself. I didn't get to learn what we found, the counselor and me. He gave the report to mom and dad, so I had to sneak up on them to hear it. Counselor thought I had difficulty adjusting to additional stimuli, that I could only manage one familiar set at a time. Kind of a low-level autism.

“Proved them wrong, didn't I?” said Beresford, tapping the window and looking down on Africa.

“It's incredible,” said Troy. “But I believe it,” he

added. He waited through an interval of smile and nod before asking, "Do I want to know about my application?"

Beresford bent his eyebrows into apology. "Not if you're anything like me," he said. "Sorry, son," he went on, hooking his thumbs in his coverall's pockets. "Wasn't my decision in the end."

Troy nodded. He fixed his eyes on empty, sparkling space, which could swallow a lifetime of warm sorrow, freeze it, and render it neutral. "Why?" he asked.

"Psychobull," said Beresford. "You were under serious consideration, I know, but someone—you want to hear this?"

"Yeah," said Troy.

"Someone wrote that you seemed to have undue difficulty focusing during stressful situations."

"Didn't seem to be much of a point," said Troy.

"I'm sorry," said Beresford again, though it sounded less like a sentiment and more like punctuation.

"Don't matter," said Troy. "Just a childhood dream, you know."

Beresford knew. He clapped Troy brotherly on the shoulder. "Well, drink it in," he said. "You don't have to come down for hours, yet." He turned to leave Troy alone.

"Sir," said Troy. "Thank Des for setting this up, would you?"

"She was happy to do it," said Beresford.

"Thank her anyway. Part of a dream come true, at least."

Beresford triggered the door open; it gave a mechanical sigh. "Drink it in, son." The door was silent when it closed.

There was a desert; there was the woman. She had two voices, and they sang together, scraped together like the hind legs of a cricket, one against the other, the other against one. The air hummed and she hummed and she provided all the echoes she could need.

Troy stood in front of her, reflecting her song back into her lips. "This land is your land," she said. "This land is my land."

She disappeared. Twilight fell in an instant; or, Troy's thirst had destroyed him and taken him to a world in which the Earth hid half her face behind a modest lock of shadow. The relief from the heat lasted only long enough for the blisters to remind him of their hot pain.

He walked. The first person he met was a kid, waist deep in a pit of mud. The kid was pulling handfuls from a shuck of straw that sat on the harder ground beside him. He pulled those handfuls under the surface of the mud, and his legs pumped like deliberate pistons. He looked up when Troy gasped for water, but didn't say anything. Troy bent to the mud and thrust his lips into it.

"Hey, man," said the kid. "You ain't supposed to be here."

Troy lifted his head to see what the kid looked like. He waited for the kid to say something else, but the kid just shrugged and drew another fist of straw under the surface. Troy watched it disappear.

"No," said Troy.

LOST LAKE

ONE

At the middle of the forest, a lodge and little cabins. Trees have been cleared, but the survivors fight back by carpeting the empty ground with uncounted clusters of needles. It is a fight that has been whispering for decades, and it looks like the trees are winning. The lodge is cracked and bloodless, a brown that makes you think of splinters, not of flannel and cocoa. The roof might have a sprinkling of leaks, but the drapery of dead branches makes a natural thatch; and it doesn't rain very often anyway.

There are about a dozen of the craftsmen, balanced evenly between the dim inside tables and the sunlit picnic benches outside. Deft hands work with a confidence that knows all mistakes can be used, so they aren't mistakes at all. Canvas turns from boring to

bright; strips of paper layer until the whole exceeds its parts; a stone gives up its ancient home and is broken into something better.

All while Caster sits near the lodge's blackened stone fireplace, bridging two benches with his long legs, and tapping lonely rhythms on his jeans, dirt crusted around their cuffs.

"I'm getting drunk off of talent." Caster speaks, but it may as well have been a thought for all the reaction it gets. All around him hands and minds are working in concert, coaxing out symphonies for the sight.

His Mom sits down next to him on the bench, swatting at a mosquito. She slides a mug of steaming cocoa across the many-stained wood, then picks up a tiny pen and pecks at a stipple of the stump outside their window.

Caster grabs the mug full-fist to warm his fingers.

"All mine, kiddo."

He nods, adds his second hand and shivers even though their table is closest to the fire.

"We need more wood."

Mom doesn't answer, except for a slight clearing of the throat that Caster has learned means she just saw something beautiful on the paper and took another step away from the practical world. He takes a sip of the cocoa, since she doesn't even know it exists anymore. It scalds his throat with welcome warmth on the way down.

"I'll take care of it."

He doesn't. He listens to, watches the scratches, chips, colors and muffled curses of a half-dozen new worlds being created. After making the rounds, his eyes return to Mom. He perhaps stares a bit too long, a bit too hard.

"Honey?" Mom speaks without lifting her eyes or pen. "You can use my colored pencils if you want."

“No; no thanks, Mom. I can't really think of anything to draw.” Caster sets down the mug as gently as he can.

“You could make one of those abstracts you used to do.”

“The ones Dad accidentally used as starter a couple of years back?”

“Those ones.”

“No, I'm fine.”

A thought that has been scratching at his conscious mind since camp began finally settles over his thoughts like a woolen blanket. Caster runs a hand through his hair, yawns and stands up.

“I'm going to take a walk.”

“Spaghetti-O's for lunch.”

There is a rock a hundred paces out of camp, forever hidden in the green. It used to take eight little arm lengths to find its circumference. Those little arms have grown, but haven't tried to ring the rock for years. Who knows how big it is, now. It used to be a spaceship, and a mountain, and a city, and the end of the dinosaurs; now, it is a spot so warm to read, to think, to dodge the beetles, bugs, and bees.

Caster finds it lonely. The sun's gentle waves lull him and he shrugs out of his jean jacket, tosses it to the ground, a sudden pillow.

He puts out his hands, palms down. His fingernails are caked with the dirt of today. But, he thinks, no paint chips, no stone dust. A couple of splinters from chopping yesterday's woodpile. He raises one hand absently to his teeth, ready to chew off a ragged line, to fidget with the nail in his mouth—but stops when his fishnet mind remembers how long it has been since he last washed.

So, sigh and sit, then lean and loaf with back against the jacket against the rock against the world.

Time passes. It is perfectly happy to do so. Time doesn't slow down for our tired tragedies, nor speed away to give pleasure an early death. Every moment takes exactly this long to pass.

A tiny train of moments chugs away from Caster on a circular track, its cars laden with his random thoughts. More are on the way.

While he listens to the trees swaying, inventing their own seconds, Caster's eyes drift closed at an order only half realized by his brain. He starts to feel cold, and thinks that the sun has died behind the latticework of branches. But when the thought is held and questioned, he realizes that the insides of his eyelids still are bright orange, not dark splotchy red.

He opens his eyes. A grin grows.

"Brig."

"What's up, Caster." Not a question.

Caster launches to his feet, thrusting out a welcoming hand. A flicker passes over Brig's hazy face. Caster halts himself, speaks through a wince.

"I forgot."

"It's not hard."

Caster plunges on without breath. "It's been forever, man. Did you just get here?"

"I've been here for a while. Thought I'd come and find you, see what you were up to. Good old basic life."

A couple uncomfortable, amiable nods keep the plodding beat of the conversation alive. Caster clears his throat.

"I was just sitting and thinking."

"What's your favorite scary story, Caster?"

Brig's caved-in eyes are so intense that Caster isn't startled by the left-fielded question. He just brings a dirty fingernail to his mouth and chews, the brave little warning not loud enough this time.

"I dunno. One of the ones that has you convinced that the killer is right behind you—" Brig is behind Caster now, looming and dark, cold and posed, a hand halted in action over Caster's white throat, ready to grip with claws, talons, or bite with fangs and freeze the heart "—getting warm at your same fire."

Brig stuffs his hands in his pockets, hunches his shoulders, in front of Caster and he never really left.

"Yeah, those ones are good."

Caster leans down to pick up his jacket, giving both of them another moment to think of something to say.

"What's it like?" asks Caster when he stands up again.

"You asking me or the trees?"

Caster can't quite fix his eyes on Brig's shaded outline. "You."

"It's different. You're jealous, aren't you?"

"Of you?" Caster starts to smile, stops, and then lets it go again when he sees its mirror on Brig's lips. There's the humor, the cynicism that connected the boys since before they knew what cynicism meant.

"No, not of me. You're not quite that stupid. Of them. Those craftsmen." An unnecessary head-fake back in the direction of the lodge.

"Not jealous."

Caster puts out his right hand, palm up. A bright flame leaps from the intersection of his life- and love-lines, twisting into a tiny pillar, like God's beacon for the Israelites. It writhes around itself, searching for a tail to bite and never finding. The flicker is lost in the blank facade of Brig's eyes, but begs a bright focus from Caster.

He closes his hand into a suffocating fist.

"Admiring, maybe."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

“At least you're still alive, green boy.”

A painter would frame the scene with Caster on one side, Brig on the other, each leaning ever so slightly toward their respective edges of the canvas, as if quietly waiting for a chance to come alive, punch through the borders and escape. Brig breaks the image by shaking his head and smiling at Caster.

“Want to go down to the lake?”

“Do you? I mean, can you?”

“I go there all the time.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“I'm not sure I could. If I had been you—”

“I know how hard you try, Cast, but you still haven't quite managed to be me, yet.” The words grin all by themselves, so Brig doesn't.

Caster half-nods: up, not down. “Yeah.”

“All right.”

They take a path that loops around the camp, sometimes no more than three feet from the clearing, but so densely shrouded that, except for sound, any other world does not exist.

The path finishes its lazy dodge. Then, with an almost-laugh, shakes itself like a dog shedding water and dashes into a series of wicked switchbacks. No matter how many times they've dragged dirty feet along it, Caster and Brig have never felt the victim of the insistent turns. They were and are cowboys clinging to the back of a bronco that would be stupid not to buck; Indians balanced in their canoes through a water trail of rapids -- they can't help but start to run.

The trip to the lake used to devour three-quarters of the clock as distraction built on distraction, a swinging chain that tiny Caster and Brig would gleefully forge and never finish breaking. The rapid easy walk is only a third of that time now, and they

pass it in pure silence. The background thrum of thrush and rushing leaves sinks into the quiet parts of Caster's mind and calls up a sigh. Brig fidgets and makes his silent footfalls.

Slowly, the gentle lapping of the tideless lake dissolves the other sounds. Caster and Brig stand by the land's edge, staring at Caster's reflection, and both of them remembering how they'd cool their feet in the shallows, making believe that they were steaming hot and supplying the sound effects.

"Pssh," hisses Caster; Brig smiles at the same memory.

The grassy, dirty slope down to the lake is spotted by few others. At this time of year, the park campground, a mile down the gravel road from the artists' retreat, is empty except for the tired families whose fathers don't get vacation until the end of August. Caster always senses something different about those campers; there's a way they hold their hands. It screams that they are not creators, that they're just here for the fun and relaxation. Not to add, but to take time away.

Caster puts his hands in his pockets.

"Wow." Brig's voice sounds alive. "Don't look now—I mean it—" Caster almost raised his head "—because she's staring right at you. Give her a sec." Caster feels a little rush of warmth and thanks God that he only blushes on his chest in bright, buried blooms. "Okay. You're clear."

"Why was she looking at me?"

"Want I should go and ask?" Brig laughs, a little too long for the humor to survive. He points the girl out to Caster.

Caster stares with the freedom of the unseen, and thanks God a second time, though for this he doesn't bother to care if God hears, as long as she is still there in between each blink.

She is beauty unmade-up to Caster's critical nervous eye. Five-year brown hair in a loose knot that draws a picture of what she must have looked like an hour ago, whipping the strands around her fists as she walked to the lake. Those casual flips that mean nothing to a girl. Her face is colored only with blood and sunlight. Her bathing suit is one-piece, a solid black. Maybe one of those ones that lets the tanning rays through, but not the lust of passersby.

She is a pretty tan already, but a harsh contrast strip of white gauze is bound around her right wrist.

"What do you think of her ears?" Brig's head is cocked and thoughtful.

"Ears?"

"Yeah, her ears. They're different."

"They look normal to me."

"I've had a chance to look at a lot of ears."

"Is that what you spend your time on?"

"Occasionally. I had a foot phase, a leg phase, hip, collarbone, and now I'm on to ears. Look over there."

Brig points with his middle finger. Caster turns his head.

"What the devil are they doing?"

Three young boys are floating in a triangle a few yards out past where the shore steepens and submits to the water's pressure. They are laughing, sputtering through a strange game. Each boy takes it in turn to try and drown the one on his right. The aggressor takes his victim's head by the ears and plunges it under the surface, while the other boy looks on and brays—taunts that probably reach the waterlogged ears as no more than dull donkey gibberish. Then, without signal or warning, the game ends and the lake gives birth to a half-drowned boy, ready to receive the next.

"Playing," shudders Brig.

One of the boys—he has white white hair and missing front teeth, the hole more noticeable than the boy—goes down. His buddies laugh and caw. Caster's shoulder blades tense; the same tired fear as when he and his family went to the Grand Canyon for vacation a couple years ago. His Dad went right up to the edge, only an uncaring second away from what could have been his death. Caster felt fear carve out a pit in his stomach.

“Do something, Caster.” Brig's voice is shuddering.

Caster shivers and takes a step away from his friend. “I thought you said you came here all the time,” he says.

The girl raises her head and squints at the boys in the water.

“Clay! Quit it out.”

No response from Clay, whichever of the boys he is.

Brig whirls suddenly and stalks off to the edge of the forest, standing near the girl though he doesn't look at her. He folds his arms across his chest as if drawing warmth from his heart and mutters coldly to himself. Caster shoots up a questioning eyebrow at him and gets as much response as the girl got from Clay.

A cloudy swarm of bubbles breaks the surface.

“Clay did it!” The boys laugh, putting free hands to their foreheads, thumb to brow, wiggling their fingers and wrinkling their noses. Caster takes a dry step, then a wet one toward them. Their laughter shrinks. Not often can a single bridge of humor last between two distant points of life. Comedy needs constant injection, otherwise it can't survive the time from the beginning of the first date to its end; the opening credits to the closing; birth to—

“Let him up, boys,” calls Caster, wet now to his shins. He needn't have said anything. The boys already have sensed the universe's buzzer calling time on their game. The one who held Clay under is backstroking to shore, his head bizarrely still, focused on Clay's empty space, while the rest of his body bounces on the water's jarring knee. The other is sputtering and sticking his face to the surface, lifting it to breathe and wipe the lake out of his eyes, then go down again.

“I can't see him! Dan, I can't see him!”

Caster is in, under, stroking through thin water with leaking hands and heavy feet. The water is dark. His palms are open and light is bursting from them. He sees white cloth against olive water and reaches his right hand. He grabs and fights up to the air.

The girl's stretching arms block out the sun. She wrestles Clay out of a death-grip that Caster didn't know he had employed. She pulls Clay to the shore, throws him down. Caster follows, a dull clang in his ears. The world fades in from gibberish to small, desperate urging cries.

“Clay! You idiot, wake up!” She presses shaking hands into still flesh.

“Is he your brother?” She nods, shaking little droplets of sweat-or-water off her hair -- it has come unbound and hangs nervously; Caster thinks it is beautiful.

Clay coughs and vomits water. His two friends stand sheepish nearby, outside striking distance and safely in the peripheral. They know something like shame, but are far too young to wrap the right words around it.

“You. Called me a. Bastard, Lil,” he forces out of stretched vocal cords.

She hugs and rocks him until he has grown from the childhood need to be comforted into the pre-teen need to be far away from weakness. He shrugs away

from her. Her eyes drift from concerned to dilated anger.

“What on Earth do you think you were doing?”

“Practicing the Golden Rule.” Caster couldn't help himself.

The girl snorts. “We're going back,” she says.

“What? No! C'mon, we just got here.”

“An hour-and-a-half ago, yeah. C'mon. It's lunch time anyway.”

A strip of dirt, overhung by combing branches of pine. Caster follows a few steps behind Clay and his sister. Brig, a few steps further.

Courage takes a long time to build. Talking to a girl in front of her little brother is not a new invention, but it might never have been this hard.

“So. Your name is Lily?” Caster is close to sure she didn't know he was following her, but she isn't startled when he speaks.

“I'm sorry. I should have said 'thank you!'.”

“Don't mention it. My friend saw them, I just did the work.”

Brig hurries his pace, near equal with Caster now. “That's right, Cast. Credit where it's due.”

“Your friend?” She hasn't turned her head yet to look at Caster.

“Yeah. He stayed back there.”

Clay is making kissing noises. Caster grins—can't tell what the girl's reaction is, since she still hasn't turned.

“Glad to see you're feeling better, Clay,” he says.

Clay pauses halfway through a marriage-night exploration of the back of his own hand. “Yeah. Thanks.” The hand droops, wilted in the heat of Caster's boring courtesy. Its owner scowls faint in concentration, then with an audible shrug, forgets the last thirty seconds of his life in favor of:

“Dad's making burgers?”

"Yes," his sister answers.

And he's gone, though it takes about eight or nine blinks for him to disappear along the path's lazy tug. Caster manages somehow to sidle forwards, replacing Clay's empty space.

He doesn't look at the girl.

"Your name's Lily?"

"Tigerlily." Now she turns, and now he sees that she has green eyes gorgeous. And now Brig stops dead for seconds. He hurries to catch up to the silent stepping pair when they disappear behind a lonely, yellowing tamarack.

"Your parents liked Peter Pan?"

"My parents liked anything British." She drops the period heavily, then grins like an imp. "Your possibilities now are: am I British, where am I from, or what's my sign?"

"Go with the sign, Cast. I'm a Cancer, remember."

Caster catches himself on the brink of: Shut up, Brig. "What's your favorite color?"

Tigerlily grants Caster a smile halfway between an appraiser surveying a prize diamond and a shark scant moments before lunch.

"Green."

"Normal green?"

"Any green."

Brig jams his hands into his pockets. "You'd better say something poetic soon, dude. You're losing her." Caster lifts his middle finger behind his back, but it is light on meaning and Brig just laughs.

"Will you hate me if I ask you where you live, now?"

"Oh, probably."

"Where do you live?"

"L.A."

"I've never been there." A frantic search for another beckoning word. "Do you like it?"

"It's an awful place. It always looks like God took His thumb and smudged out the horizon." Caster makes a small sound of appreciation. He makes the same sound during good movies, or when his friends say something admirable, memorable.

"Do you write?"

"No."

Caster is finally well brave enough to look at her. "You should."

"You should read."

"What should I read?"

"The book of poems I ganked that from."

"Ah. Don't be a plagiarist, then, I guess."

"No; plagiarism is fine. Xeroxing, not so much. Ruins the environment."

The easy way the conversation bounces between courts makes Caster feel like a little champion just for playing.

"Ask about the bandages, Caster."

"No."

"What?" She is polite; maybe he mumbled.

Ignoring Brig, Caster asks, "Where do you go to school?"

Tigerlily's head bobs up and down as she walks, not as ridiculously pronounced as a quail's, but it makes Caster smile. "School of cosmetology."

"No lie?"

"That's not really something people lie about a lot."

"I guess not. What do you want to do with your life?"

"Movie make-up."

Caster grows as indignant as the last old-growth mammoth in a newly logged forest. "What? You're going to a school of cosmetology and want to spend

your life putting gunk on people's faces?" He notices that she isn't nodding vague assent, or using her eyes to thank him for his noble sympathy. He finishes, feeling like a broken leg. "Why not at an observatory, or—"

Tigerlily smiles broadly. "Cos-me-to-logy," she repeats. She giggles. Caster takes it in the gut, feels the point of adult derision, not the balm of a girlish crush.

"I could have saved you, bonehead." Brig smirks. It fades. His mind flashes. Each ego-blow that Caster takes is not an automatic add to his own, not like in the old games of "Catch the Crush" that the friends used to play. Brig walks in a different-same world, separated from his friend, but not from his desires. He wants Tigerlily. But he is not in dull competition with Caster for her thoughts and affections. She hasn't ever laughed and said, "Brig. That's an interesting name," and he never had, has, will have the chance to say, "My parents met in jail." But if Caster wasn't here, if she was the only warmth, then Brig could have her—hold her terrible and fierce—this is what an avenging angel feels at the center of its holy, useless stomach.

It falls a little colder in the forest. With malice, Brig reaches his hand into Caster's chest and pulls. Caster shivers, falters step, and meets knee with ground. Tigerlily turns and starts to speak mundane, but the look on Caster's face freezes her tongue.

"You bastard! You— God!" Only Caster hears Brig's litany of frustration, and he doesn't pay attention. He sees his friend dancing around him like beautiful Lucifer, festooned with struggling little girls, their eyes gouged and—a world black on one side, white on the other and he feels himself on the wrong side—the sound of his future wife crying over his death bed and the sound of her cackling with glee when she sees that he left their estranged son out of

his will, both shrieks mixing together, becoming one, then two, then one, two, one.

Caster holds his palms up, tilts his head back. Tigerlily is on the ground next to him, and he is so cold. A groan begins to snake its way out of his throat, climbing off the tongue and dripping onto the dirt. It builds like fever.

At its peak, Brig whirls away from the light, losing concentration, breaking off his string of curses. Once his mind adjusts, he turns back and sees Caster's head cradled in Tigerlily's sudden-tender lap. Brig wishes very badly to hit something, to feel the jarring up to his shoulder, the vibration that discharges frustration and replaces all the world with a tiny scrap of pain.

Without meeting Caster's eyes again, he turns on his heel and melts into the forest.

Caster's eyes are cold and black, pupils dilated. He is staring at the sun through a fissure in the trees. Tigerlily bends her head over him, blocking most of the light and diffusing the rest through her hair. She catches his twisting head and pushes a calming sound between her teeth, like the hiss of tumbling rocks on Dover Beach.

Caster can only see her. The rest of the encroaching world crumbles away into pure, warm black. She holds him there, out of the world he recognizes, for as long as it takes for him to stop.

“Stop shivering.”



Brig takes brisk step after step, not disturbing a single struggling blade of grass. He doesn't turn, his squinted eyes fixed firmly down the tunnel to that spot on the ground just ahead of his feet. If he did turn, he wouldn't see a trail of crumb-like footprints, or the faint destruction that the living leave in every wake.

His eyes do not give up water, his veins do not carry angry blood, but his mind rails on itself again and again and—a hundred, a thousand invisible footsteps into the forest—when it exhausts all its own hate, it takes a step back and swings hard at the maker of all things bright, beautiful, rotting and dead.

Why does human nature continue on past humanity, Brig wonders. It is a thought with spikes. Why do I still want to feel?

“And, little Brig, why do you demand an answer for everything. Including that.”

Nearly beneath the solid haze of his foot is a tiny feather, colors swirling across its canvas hairs; it is no more noble than the grass it is woven with, no longer than Brig's extended middle finger.

“I don't want to talk.”

He lowers the finger, and the feather chuckles again, finally settling on a dull grey.

“How is our experiment?”

“This is a nothing life.”

“It isn't a life. Pick me up.” Brig, obeying without questioning, kneels and places the feather in the center of his palm.

“Breathe on me.”

Still kneeling, Brig opens his memory of mouth and remembers how it feels to exhale. Then he stands.

“When did I say undeath was going to be easy?”

Brig straightens in silence. He twirls the feather between his thumb and ring finger.

“Easy.” Brig's face is a hideous dog snarl, mixed with the sound of the gunshot that kills your husband in his bed. “You never did say it was going to be easy. You never said it was going to be anything.”

“You volunteered.”

“I was sad.”

“You are sad. Put me behind your ear.” Brig does, the hand with the feather gentle, the other clenching

and unclenching, nails long and bloody, short and ragged, clenching and unclenching, memory of tendons creaking, but no chains rattling.

“Brig. You are a child.”

“I know I'm a freaking child.”

“Hold your mind open for just a second. I'm going to tell you about a painting.” Brig gets the unarguable impression that the feather is clearing its lack-of-throat. “It's hanging in the Louvre. It shows a young girl, haloed and dressed in virginal white, floating on her back on the surface of black, black water. Her skin is as pale as the best wedding dress, and after five seconds, you realize that she is dead—has always been dead. So much black, and all you see is that white girl, clenched in a haze of mercy. Then you tear your gaze away, and see a few dim shapes standing on the bank. You can't tell what they're thinking, what they're saying; not just from how they hold their bodies. Did they kill the girl? Do they reverence her? Do they lust for her?”

Brig resumes his walk, but his eyes have lost the lead of anger, replaced by cotton apathy.

“I don't know,” he only mutters.

“Of course you don't know. Not even the artist knew. Brig: you're mine. You're dead.”

“And I'm here.”

“Do you want to come back?”

“I want to know why you are doing this to me.”

“Because it is beautiful to learn.”

Brig sees, smells, hears the bright tether of the lake. He doesn't make a sound as he steps from the forest to the strand of dark brown beach. He dips his toe into the water. Once, he would have found a childish fascination in watching the blankness yield to his body without a ripple.

“I don't want to be this way.”

The feather drifts in a wind that doesn't mar the surface of the lake and twirls to hang in front of Brig's eyes.

"Then I have learned something. But you haven't. Not yet."

Brig takes a few paces out onto the surface of the water to get away from the penetrating, eyeless gaze of the feather.

"What do I have to learn?" The question is directed to a tiny brown fish, rooting hastily along the gravel of the lake bottom.

"You have to learn how to kill yourself again."

When Brig looks up, the feather is still there, hanging by its stem from the empty air. He sits down. The fish is swimming mad circles around itself, trying to find something to eat. Brig reaches down his cursing hand and freezes its microscopic heart in terror. It floats to the surface and looks like just another bubble.

"They can't see me like they saw her," he tells the fish.

"Brig!"

Caster jogs down the slope, stopping even with the feather, though he gives no blush of having seen it.

"Cast. Hey. You okay?"

"I'm fine. What happened to you?" The words are simple serious, the tone just stunted banter.

"I got jealous."

"Of me?"

A pause, no longer, no more dramatic than the time to inhale. "Of you. Can we get out of here?"

"Sure. Yeah. Let's go back. I'm getting hungry, anyway."

"Not me."

The path lopes back uphill, passing easily underneath their feet. Caster fidgets, taking the potential of a hundred words he's not sure Brig wants

to hear and turning it into little finger twitches, scrapes, and twirls. Brig shoots a sidelong punctuation with eyes that of course are cold. "Just say it."

"I . . . It's okay, man. Forgiveness-wise. For getting angry—"

"I don't get angry. You need glands to get angry."

"Do you need glands to be jealous?"

"I'm tired of this." Little by little, Brig's voice is getting softer.

"What is it, Brig?"

"You had nice words for me. At the end. You had Mom in tears."

"I wasn't looking."

"Where did you get them?"

"Brig. I understand."

Brig laughs, and a few pine needles fall. Caster stoops and snatches one, his fingers leaping gratefully into the distraction.

"You don't understand."

"All right—I feel like I understand."

"No. No. This is wrong. This isn't working. It used to be that when one of us was down, the other was up, and vice versa. We always balanced. Now we're not. Now I'm this flat line, and you bounce off me like you're on a trampoline."

They conquer the last switchback.

"What happened, Brig?"

"Talked with God a little. What happened to you?"

"Nothing much. Had a heart-attack. Nearly died. Got Tigerlily's phone number."

"Whoop-dee-doo."

"Bastard."

Two grins that fade naturally.

They stop at the edge of the clearing, the toes of their shoes cast in bright gold. "What are you going to

do now?" asks Brig. Caster unfocuses his eyes, turning the whole camp into a fog. He sighs.

"Probably take a nap. No offense, but you haven't brightened my day."

"Likewise."

"This sort of distraction only lasts so long. You?" Brig shrugs. "Want to talk for a while? I'd offer you lunch, but."

Brig replies with his middle finger first. "No. I need to find something." He turns away, hazy and losing cohesion like steam on a lake.

"Brig?"

"Yeah?"

"I hear they use urine in some exorcisms. I could, you know . . ."

"No. Thanks."

"Really, I—"

"No. And fuck you."

Caster laughs, his eyes squinting shut. When he opens them full wide again, Brig is gone on his hunt for dead knives. Caster starts toward the lodge, dropping the pine needle with an absent loosening grip. It settles on its fellows, soundless and dry, twisted into a perfect letter *J*, soon kicked and covered and sooner forgotten.



TWO

A room without posters or pictures plastering the walls. A bedroom is a sacred space, a hole in the baseboards of the world where the cat can't reach its claws. There is a lot that one can tell of a person by looking at her room.

She learned the word *utilitarian* in second grade, and it has been forever linked to her room in her

mind. A computer, a bed, a poorly-carpeted floor so feet do not get too cold, a dresser packed with clothes that probably shouldn't be wrinkled but are. The walls and ceiling are painted green, her only concession to leaving a legacy. The pages she has read buoyed on her bed would drift six feet or more, burying her in words and afternoons. The time spent sleeping could not possibly be equal to the years her dreams have chronicled. The blood slipped out of veins and into tissues could hold here another life.

She loves it here; but isn't right now.

Clay hunches over her computer in the dark, bright photons spilling around his outline. A progress bar shines that an MPEG with a lot of Xs in the title has nearly gotten through censors and wires to arrive at his dilated eyes.

The door opens, and Clay's heart trades itself in an instant for one beating four times as fast.

"Lil! Didn't hear you coming." Click, click, cancel, curse.

Tigerlily inhales, and doesn't let the air go.

"Scoot, Clayball."

Clay slithers off her chair, one hand hovering over his crotch.

"Ask next time, okay?" Tigerlily says.

"Okay."

The door closes behind him. Tigerlily wrinkles her nose at the hanging smell of male. Not the normal smell of sweat—Daddy's sweat, when he held her in his bed the whole night before her appendectomy and didn't fall asleep—but the smell of lust. Cloying, and loud, and not a new thing.

Not one that belongs in her sanctuary. She opens a wide window and spends a couple useless seconds fanning at the smell, like a smoker who waves away the last tentacles of grey while the cigarette burns out in the ashtray.

For her own amusement, she stretches her small palms over the monitor and mumbles, "*In nomine patri, et fili, et spiritus sanctine*, or whatever, amen." She smiles, because she knows that's what someone else would do if he stood here to see her.

She pushes her chair out of the way and eases down on to her knees, gentle because the carpet is just fuzzy concrete. She has been trying to work on her posture lately, and she finds that her spine is straighter if she's uncomfortable. She has to be careful, though; too many people have ideas about rug burns on a pretty girl's knees.

It would take too long to change all their minds.

She logs out of the desktop her brother uses, knowing that the tiny guilty prints he made are being dusted away. She cocks her head toward the nearest wall, watching shadows go hazy as the screen fades black, then sharpen with the brightness of the machine's polite request for another user.

Tigerlily types her name all in lowercase, the password with numbers in place of letters—3 is an E, 4 is an A. That's her generation's identity, and she thinks it's—

“Puny.”

The whirring crunching thinking picks up spare decibels. Tigerlily has to remind herself that the cricket sounds are the moving parts; the electrons don't have a sound of their own. Clay managed ten minutes of shooting self-esteem last week while redefining the way his sister hears the world, punctuating his import with enthusiastic squeaks.

She's hoping to read from Caster's fingers, then to send him a few misspelled words of her own, blinking and squawking up the phone lines to his waiting eyes. Hope for a good weekend, breezy homework, peace in the mornings. He always, never tedious, hopes the same for her.

Not tonight, though; her mailbox is empty.

With a wrinkled smile, she punches at the power button and misses, pokes it a second time to get the beast to stop whining. Clay would screech at the abuse. She thinks she might tell him, just so he can know how evil his sister really is.

“You're dumb,” she flicks at her warped faint reflection. She creaks to her feet, and the old joists under the floor echo as her small painted toes step to the door and down stairs.

Mom is filling the kitchen with invisible smells carried on visible clouds. She takes a step back from the stove, arms held halfway warding as a rush of heat escapes a boiling pot. Tigerlily pads over the thin carpet, decorated with a linoleum print, and hops up onto the counter.

“Smells good, Mom.”

“You're going to eat tonight, aren't you?”

“I'm hungry.”

Mom approaches the range again, sweeping curious hairs away from her cheeks. “I'm glad to hear that.”

Tigerlily swings her heels against the cupboard doors. She tries to decide if she wants to tell her parents about Clay's habits on the Internet. They wouldn't find out otherwise. Even added together, they don't equal a Sherlock Holmes. Maybe a half-Watson apiece.

It's not generosity, but something close, that makes her say, “You should talk to Dad about getting Clay his own computer.”

“Oh, honey,” Mom stabs a spoon into the pot. “You know we can't afford that right now.”

“Bull, Mom.”

Mom grins into the whirlpool she's making. “Whatever happened to the phrase ‘horse apples’, Tiger?”

“I didn't take it.”

Tigerlily spends a moment gauging her Mother's mood, pressing against whatever tension hangs in the air, feeling for resistance. Then she twists and slides from her perch, kicks open a Lazy Susan and starts clinking crystal dishes into a manageable stack.

“Thanks, honey.”

“Seriously, Mom. He's always on my machine, and I don't like having him in my room that much.” She sets four plates on the table and goes back for glasses.

“You're never home, Tiger. You're either at school or soaking in the city. Why shouldn't he be in there?” Tigerlily, bent in search of the goblets embossed with her family's coat of arms, scowls at Mom. Her lips begin to phrase the first syllable of a word. “Principle, I know,” Mom gets there first. “We could move your 'machine' into one of the family rooms.”

“Thanks. That's a great idea. Witch.”

“Don't mention it.”

Four more tiny bell-rings, goblets flanking plates. The finale will be the cymbal-crash of silverware.

“Did anyone call for me today?”

“No. You got some junk mail, though. I threw it away.”

“Does that count as a Federal offense?”

“Not in this household.”

“I think you need to meet Caster's Mom.” The suggestion dies partway off her mouth, its roots torched by the half-smile Mom greets it with. Tigerlily finishes, and bravery has nothing to do with it. “You two would get along.”

The reply is the silence of a Mother whose daughter once ordered her to “never interfere with my love life again!” and is keeping her promise sharp. Normalcy returns with the clatter of silver on Formica.

The phone rings.

"I'll get it," calls Tigerlily unnecessarily loud.

"It's probably for you anyway," says Mother, just unnecessary.

Tigerlily winces. Though, or because, her back is turned, she knows how biting the polite Mother smile is that aged answers her enthusiasm. When she says, "Hello," it sounds like a curse.

"Uh. Hey. Tigerlily?"

"Oh. Oh! Hey, Caster. What's up?"

"Not much."

"Surprise, surprise." It's a soft manipulation, but effective. Tigerlily treats every conversation with a guy like a circus, forcing him as a lion through hoops. Caster must not mind.

"Fine. There's plenty going on. There's fifteen credits worth of stuff going on."

"You didn't write to me." She sets the next hoop on fire.

"It was a busy day."

"With nothing going on."

Tigerlily snakes her way through the downstairs family room. In a far corner looms a pillow chair, nooked away, swallowing whatever last evening light makes it that far.

She hears, doesn't register, that Caster hasn't done more than breathe at her half-cocked criticisms. A slow discomfort rises higher than the embrace of the cold pillows.

"Hello?"

"I'm here."

Not only does she know that something should be said, but she wants to say it, too. "I'm only a voice, Caster. I'm sorry."

"For what?"

Human minds are so complicated, curving into themselves with bladed ferocity, and frantically

searching for a balm to spread over the self-inflicted wounds. The king's share of times, Tigerlily supposes she just has to start speaking and trust that her little words aren't powerful enough to end the world.

"If you don't know, then never mind."

"I just wanted to call—" Here it is. The nervous pitch melting his voice, flashing an argon sign that labels his discomfort. "—and apologize for not writing today. I wasn't really having much fun, and had to write an essay during the time I'd normally write to you."

"What's wrong, Caster?"

"Nothing. Why? What's wrong with you?"

"The usual."

"Same here, I guess."

Tigerlily stands up, frustrated she trekked all the way to the pillow seat for what will be such a short conversation.

"I don't have much to add, Tigerlily." The discomfort sign blinks off. There is an honesty that welcomes her warm legs back onto the seat.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"Well, yes. But." The invitation travels slower than the words. Caster picks it up with care, probably afraid that it's too heavy for his hands to figure out how to hold.

"I don't measure up to Mom. And it's not just a comparison with her. I don't want that to be the driving force behind my life, Freud. I just know. I'm telling you too much."

"No."

"Yes, I am. Or not telling you enough. Or something. I don't know."

"I'm glad—" She doesn't get far enough for the tone of her voice to carry any meaning.

"I'm glad, too. That you listen to me. I'm going to go to bed now, though."

"It's only seven."

"I'll probably read for a while."

"Oh." She sees the shape of her thoughts, the slouch of a peasant running from his master's courtyard, and she doesn't know why. "Well, I hope you have a good night tonight."

"Thanks. You too. I'll be sure to write tomorrow."

"When do you work?"

"From seven until three. I'll write after that."

"Okay. Goodnight, Caster."

"Goodnight."

She turns off the phone and carries it back to its cradle, mumbling, "I'd really like to see you again." She starts to sing it, a little tune that frolics up the scale and leapfrogs back down. It hurts her face.

"How is young Master Caster?" shoots Mother from the stove.

"I changed my mind. I'm not hungry."

Tigerlily is grateful that there is a wall between the kitchen and the stairs, so that Mother's eyes can not climb with her.



"Man, it's hot out here."

"Bug off, Clayball."

"Only to tell Mom."

"She's used to it." Tigerlily is sprawled on a deck chair, perched on the roof. She wears sunglasses, because Los Angeles actually looks better through a waste-brown filter.

"Watch, Lil. I learned this on teevee." Clay shuffles to the shingled edge and jumps off. Tigerlily turns toward the sun. She can't read its seconds, but

knows only a few have passed before Clay comes scrambling up the ladder again.

“Did it work?”

“I landed in dog poop.”

“I'm telling Dad.”

“That I said 'poop'?”

“That you jumped off the roof. Without asking.”

“He'll ground me!”

“Literally.”

“I hate you, Lily.” A grin lights up her face, nearly trumpeting its victory over boredom. She takes off her sunglasses and, rising, grabs Clay's arm. He stops trying to flick the brown stain onto her and trips into her eyes.

She holds him in there and speaks.

“You've never hated me. You respect me, little brother. And you never mind telling me so.”

She lets the bridge collapse. Clay blinks and orients the universe. He smiles, shy and deep, turns his back to scrape the poop off his shins in decency.

The sunglasses go back down and Tigerlily stands, only a little frustrated.

“Where are you going?”

“To the mall. Watch a movie.”

“Can I come with?”

“No. You hate me, remember?”

“What?”

With a promise to Mother to be back by nine for Saturday night family time, Tigerlily slides into her simple functional car and adds her own gust of smog to the already hanging ocean.

It's called the Heritage Supermall. As she crosses the double line of speed-bumps, Tigerlily thinks always, If this is our heritage. The Scots get their kilts and web work families. The Nipponese, their samurai and spirits. What do we get? Plastic.

She parks as close to the massive hub of the sprawling wheel as she can. The thing must be dense enough to have its own gravity. She slides her purse over her shoulder and feels balanced. When the weight isn't there, she always drifts a little to the left; compensation. She locks her car and clicks to the huge wall of safety-glass doors, conscious of every eye that pauses over her for more than a second.

The architects of the mall, imprisoned in their blueprints, were smart enough to put the theater far enough away from the entrance that every patron has to trudge past a double row of ever-changing teaser posters. Before she even makes the box office, Tigerlily has spent a shaving of time with a serial killer, a twitterpated couple, a tough-as-nails police officer, and an animated skunk. The faces always have different names attached to them, but the eyes are always the same. Cold, or soft, or haunted, or cuter than is natural.

She slides her sunglasses on.

There must be quite a siren showing on screen three. The line in front of the box office is a stretch of gangly limbs and acne. Tigerlily ghosts to the back.

She takes one poorly painted nail and scratches it along the inside of her wrist, tracing a scar. The journey is incredibly long for her baby finger. It covers so much more than the few inches of pretty paling skin. This one is three years long. This one just a couple of weeks.

She doesn't wear long-sleeved shirts to cover up. She doesn't feel the need to hide from people she doesn't care about. She doesn't care what they think. Sometimes when people say that, what they really mean is: I don't care if they think poorly of me; but if they do, I hope at least they think I'm tortured, a poor waif and child weighed by memories and maladies larger than my life. She doesn't.

She also doesn't pay attention to the rest of the world often enough. Her next step is a stubbed toe against the baseboard of the box office.

"Tigerlily?"

She ratchets her gaze up into the slight spotted face of a girl who used to have a name.

"Uh. Hey."

"I haven't seen you for a year! How are you?"

"Bifurcated, as usual." The other girl's response is meant to be a polite silence, but misses a bit on that whole 'polite' part. "It means split in two," Tigerlily adds.

"Yeah. Um. What are you going to see?"

For the first time, Tigerlily looks at the schedule. She can't match any of the names to any desires of her heart. Instead, she throws a thumb over her shoulder.

"What have these guys been seeing?"

"*Easy Rider Two*."

"I'll take anything else."

The girl taps on her keyboard. Tigerlily finds a memory hiding. The tapping fingers. Back in freshman year of high school. The girl always tapped a pen against her braces. No braces now. Tigerlily used to call her *Starry Night*, because the way the sun glinted off her teeth when they played soccer in phys-ed. The girl didn't know Van Gogh. Probably still doesn't.

Heather. "Heather?"

The girl rips the ticket from the gifting slot in the counter and meets eyes with Tigerlily.

"Hmm?"

Tigerlily hardens her lips and feels her focus shift entire to Heather and her once-clay, always-clay mind.

"Thank you for always being my good friend, Heather. You have always been there for me. You always will be there if I need you, and I appreciate your life so much. But I don't think that I will be

seeing you much more while we're alive, and I don't think that should bother you."

Dark snakes twist around the edges of vision, and Heather blinks. She slides the ticket with her warm hand through the tiny, sanitary hole in the glass dividing employee from other. Her fingertips brush Tigerlily's.

Heather smiles, warmth and trust. Tigerlily bows her head in thanks and leaves it bowed as she slouches into the theater.

She hands her ticket to the taker, and he gives her rote directions. On the way to her screen, she kicks over a garbage can, spilling popcorn and chocolate.

"Because I can."

The movie is two hours; it feels like three. She has to pee halfway through. She slips out right before the credits start.

The bathroom is tiled in black and mostly deserted. A little girl chatters about a horse as her mother helps her climb on and off a toilet; the voice alive echoes itself into a choir. Tigerlily takes the next stall over and just listens.

When the girl and her smiling mother have left in search of a pony, Tigerlily makes her way to the row of sinks. She runs hot water until the porcelain steams, then puts her hands underneath.

The mirror is clean; but it's still hard for Tigerlily to see what color her eyes are. She stares, palms and knuckles reddening.

"I could do it, you know. I could change your mind." She feels like a twin. "Make you stop feeling heavy when you compensate for change. Whenever anything goes wrong, you swallow rocks, lead, like the Calaveras frog. I could make you change your mind and love you. You know that I could. And then Caster would have you, meek and bubbly, and you could be there—be here—for him. You could brighten his day

instead of dulling it. You could make millions of people happy.” Only she feels the soft sting of everyman irony. Only she needs to. “You can do it. Fade to black on the borders, and get bright in the middle. Or something. You can do it and nobody else can. Nobody else can. Else can. Else can.” She starts to hum, and tends a small smile at the silliness of the spoken empty words.

She leaves the mirror unbroken, unhealed and the water running. The mess she made of the garbage can has been cleaned up.

The automatic drive back to her house is far from black—too much blazing phosphor, too many halogen intrusions. She would like to believe that her purpose is set so solid, like veined marble, that she is impossible to distract, but those thoughts always feel like a slightly different definition of hypocrisy.

She composes a letter to Caster, dropping periods into place as headlights knife past at knee height.

Will you be convinced, she thinks and hates the way the word *convinced* sounds, that you are important because you have weighed on my mind today? Or will that just make you feel like a burden? I know you. I suspect the latter. I give you permission to kill me if I'm wrong.

A pair of light bars flash patriotism around a corner, shooting silhouetted cop cars to break Tigerlily's almost-concentration. She slows, scrutinizes the instinctive checklist—tags, tail-lights, head-lights, seat-belt—and doesn't feel safe again until the red, blue, and clear are blocks behind.

Kill me if I'm wrong. She takes the last phrase and coaxes it around in her mind, finally delivering it to her tongue.

“Kill me if I'm wrong—” and then move on.

You are a whiner, Cast. You know you have to hear it blatantly like that. You don't do anything about

what you call your lack, but please don't let me hate you for that. I know about lack.

Was my wrist bandaged when you met me? You have been on my mind because I want you there. I wish you'd come and see me. I could show you. You'd understand. Since you fainted in the forest, I have loved your head in my lap, in memory most, because you have the marks of creation on you.

She feels the inspiration harden; the twisted, tired desire to bridge two minds with thought sinks away. She's done. She carefully weighs the possibilities for the final words. *Love* would be all right; *sincerely* would be true; *yours*, a lie. She cements the shape of the letter in her mind, though the words themselves may escape.

Gravel driveway crunches and she stops the car.

When she gets out, her scars are dark invisible and hurting, and she wants nothing as blood honestly than to help Caster go to sleep cradled in value, and to let herself not hope for strength somewhere outside to come in.



THREE

Memory holds a room in two places, occupying the same space differently. Brig has a heap of years to rummage angry through, and his decision of what to see is quick, even timeless. The boxes fade, reluctant to dominate the hole that used to hold a crib, then a bunk bed, then a water bed. The posters, neatly rolled by a parent's sobbing hands, drift hazy to their places on the same old paint. Nothing is the same, and to Brig, perched on the corner post of the crib, everything is the same.

Drifts of needles, knives, and pills bury the carpet. A rope swings from the overhead light, wrapped only

twelve times. The air is black. Sunshine sneaks around to other welcome windows, leaves this one, with its baseball-sized shatter, alone.

Brig blinks. Even with his eyes closed, he can see.

In his hand, a serrated blade, ugly, too ugly to be useful. He grips it tight, twists one palm around it, forcing grey blood in rivulets down the metal, the fake fabric of his shirt; it disappears when it drips.

“Work.”

The knife leaps like an eager student, dull without daylight but bright with enthusiasm, sinks hilt-to-flesh into Brig's breast. He could decorate the walls, the crib with its knit baby blanket, the piles of abandoned pain with a gout of terror, spilling from his invisibly beating heart. He could cut out the image, grip it in his fist and squeeze. He could fall over and stop breathing.

It's just a game, after all.

He pulls the stupid knife out and flings it to the floor. It doesn't care enough to make a sound.

The door opens and the old room flickers between being Brig's and the burnt-out alternative. Brig lifts a clawed hand, ready for the anger at interruption. Large feet wander in through thick unstained wool.

“Dad.” The claws die. The hands stay up.

Brig's Dad pauses full over the threshold, and wiggles his Hobbit-hair toes for a little frail warmth. He holds a stack of old magazines, cords standing out all along his arms, unsweaty. He inhales, maybe stealing a little bit of whatever Brig is left and storing intangible in his lungs. He blinks in his sun, bends over, and lets go of the magazines. They crumple over on themselves, creasing heavy rain forests, sad natives, earthquake victims.

He turns around, blinks longer, and exhales. Brig lowers his threat of a hand. The room is empty.

Disgust flares at the magazines. Brig hates, and they turn to dust in front of him.

A mind can't turn itself to dust; can't fix a basilisk glare on a mirror and solve instantly all problems, with a lack of satisfaction. Nothing quick can cure. It has been months since Brig first put the fear of metal to his wrist, and nothing still has worked. He can't forget himself, crumple up and fall away; where would he fall to? Something like hell, something like low heaven? God is silent, patient; better far than Brig, powerful and dead.

He screams and his bedroom leaves, the instant emptiness of a simple storage room replacing. A box of old baby toys in place of the crib, of action figures stacked on comic books where the bedside table stood a hand's worth of years ago. The dresser is still here, filled with unwarm unwashed unsold clothes.

Brig, on his knees, not in prayer, is not here.



Caster feels like stone but is burning anyway. Her plane is taxiing; a difficult word for such a glacial motion. Things that take forever should have simple words, minimal, to match the grace of eternity. An inaudible deep grinding takes the ramp out to the door of the 737. It takes at least thirty Mississippis. Caster stops counting. He wants to shout, shove sound-waves into the back of the sloth process to help it along.

“Whatcha thinking?”

The sound, the voice is too familiar for Caster to be startled. Just familiar enough to force his eyebrows down into anger.

“Brig. Buzz off.”

“I don't have anywhere else to be.”

Brig stands up, makes a boring show of dusting off his knees. He leans against Caster, weightless.

"That her plane?"

"Yeah." Quiet Caster, so worried about looking weird, talking to the air.

"Haven't seen her for quite a while."

"You haven't, or I haven't?"

"Yep."

"I hate it when you do that."

A short fall into silence. Sleepy passengers spill out of the gate, trying to get their legs under them again. Every face is someone unimportant. A three-dee collage, with all these shapes and colors, useless but to push out of their confusion a masterpiece; the real focus of the picture. The girl, sunglasses sliding off and into purse, her brown hair loose and curling by itself, cotton warmth and smelling like skin.

"It's good to see you, Caster." She smiles the words.

"That's just what I was going to say." Brig's words are focused, knifing directly into Caster's brain and missing Tigerlily's entirely.

Caster steps into open soft arms, as much to get away from Brig as to get closer to her. Neither is comfort. Caged by her far-too-delicate grip, he feels like clay, malformed. His hands aren't confident enough to trace a line, a curve, or add a color to make her more beautiful.

He realizes his eyes have been closed and he opens them. Brig's face is dense, blocking Tigerlily's, and he is grinning. Caster backs away.

"I've missed you," Tigerlily says.

"Y'know, that's funny," ices Brig. "Because you two really haven't shared anything except fears, so you have to wonder what she means when she says she's missed you. Has she been fantasizing about you? Your poor little palpitating heart giving way, so she can be a

mother to you. Maybe she likes domination. You should ask her if she brought any leather with her.”

Caster's wedges his eyes closed. Tigerlily's concern comes in a stiff crescendo.

“Are you all right?”

Caster shakes his head, not answering but trying to dodge Brig's words.

“She suspects something, Caster. You're going to have to tell her about me, you know. Tell her the best stories about me. Our lazy days building forts to escape the housework. The secrets that you told me. All secrets—”

“Please just shut up!” A separate scream for each word. Tigerlily's hands making brighter pressure on his shoulder. Brig's empty mouth.

“Caster, Caster, what's wrong?”

He hears her tone, not her words. He tightens his spine. “Let's go somewhere quiet.”

They make their way through the concourse, then across the pavement to the car. Brig whispers from start to finish, quiet because he knows how much more it terrifies not to hear what hides just over the horizon.

Tigerlily lets Caster borrow her sunglasses as he drives; he doesn't have any of his own. She doesn't even laugh at how silly he looks with designer L.A. on his face. The roads snake, seeming empty to Tigerlily. She doesn't force words from Caster. She waits. His lips move several times, never quite spitting out slippery English.

Brig has settled into silence. Like a minimalist painter, his instinct loves to let him haunt in absence. Caster's eyes flick to the rearview mirror far more than safety suggests, but Brig lets himself pass out of view. He smirks.

In a gradual series of swung turns, Caster pulls them away from Spokane's heart. He gets lost, not

paying attention to road signs or memory. But Brig keeps silent, if he notices, if he's there, and Tigerlily doesn't even know where they are going. Eventually, the half-hearse pulls into a small parking lot and kills itself quick.

"Finch Arboretum," reads Tigerlily.

"It's a place to relax," says Caster as he hands back her glasses. She slides them onto her face, smiles with eyes hidden, and pushes her way out into the air. Caster, regretting the missed chance to be a gentleman, follows. Brig drifts behind on a wind of his own choosing.

"This place always reminds me of Lost Lake," Caster says to spark attention. Tigerlily turns and smiles. Nothing more spectacular than that.

"Dad loves finding places like that. I sure enjoyed it."

"Yeah, so did I. It didn't have these." He nods his head at the concrete wall behind the trees, at the whizzing cars supposedly hidden on the other side. He starts walking, offers his arm. Tigerlily loops her hand through, and they both feel the hum of sunlight vibrating their bodies.

"Had you been there before?" She asks looking straight at him. He answers looking away.

"Every year since I was six. There was an art camp that my Mom was in charge of. She'd bring us along when we were younger, and then we started wanting to go on our own."

"We?"

"Me and my—" he didn't mean to, but he did it, he stumbled into tragedy, and he's going to have to—

"Don't tell her, Caster. Don't think you can—"

"Brig. My friend."

"He didn't come this last year?"

"No, he didn't. He died two years ago."

Tigerlily nods, heavy head for a heavy heart. Caster feels her invitation to press on.

Brig is silent scowling, beginning to growl without shaking the air.

“You know how they say you can't drown yourself?”

“I've heard that, yeah.”

“Brig did. He swam out one night to the raft the kids use for diving. Tied weights to his arms and legs. Jumped in.”

“You don't know it happened that way, my friend. Maybe the Mafia killed me. It wasn't me. Not necessarily.”

Caster sets stone in his eyes and goes on. Tigerlily's soft silence makes a cushion for his memory.

“He didn't leave a note, or anything. His Mom wasn't expecting it. Neither was I. We spent that whole day playing games in the lodge, and at sunset, he went out to do some painting. He was pretty good at it, capturing colors. I never could do it quite. Like his eyes were clearer or something. But he didn't come back. I was reading in front of the fire. Lost track of time. Went out to check on him, and he wasn't there. He left the painting. The brushes. The lids off the paint. I figured he took a walk with one of the random girls that always shows up at the camp. I went to bed. I woke up. He wasn't there.”

Caster breathes, half expecting the rest of his words to crawl out his lungs and onto the gentle carrying wind; but nothing.

Brig screams, all anger from drowned memories scraping through Caster's unready skull and into his brain. It doesn't shut the story up.

“They didn't find him for a week. His Mom was hysterical. Not just when they told her, but for days afterward. She asked me to write the eulogy. I had no

idea, no idea at all. About what to write, I mean. What was I supposed to write about my best friend. A coward. I envied him so much.”

Brig turns to mist in his mind's eye. He spreads out across the meadows, trees, hurting and forcing needles under the fingernails, eyeballs, of everything his memory calls pain, and every creature too weak to fend his hollow fury. He pulls all parts together a pregnant mile from Tigerlily's sympathy and hunches, unhearing.

“Have you ever had to write a eulogy?” Tigerlily shakes her head. “It wasn't easy. No, it was worse than that. It was so hard.” Caster puts down a hand to check for dew. Everything is dry. He sits, and Tigerlily follows him down.

“It took me an entire week. And it wasn't because I was avoiding the words. It was just too hard to sort through everything and make sense of anything. It was so tangled; the memories of my entire life growing up with him.”

A pause for breath and warmth. “That's a lot of words,” Tigerlily says, very quiet, very clear. Caster nods.

“A lot of words, and none of them intelligible. I've never been good at making things. I can't create. I can't make something beautiful. He could make everything beautiful and I can't believe he stopped, that ass had everything and he plugged it all—”

With a choke, Caster stops the spill of words. He flings out his nets to drag the once-again web of his thoughts back within reach.

In his silence, Tigerlily reaches out her hand. She touches the fabric of his T-shirt, real and textured. Her hand runs down his arms, lifting little hairs and coaxing the small bumps that tell her that his body feels, even if his mind forgets. She fumbles for his hand and turns it, palm to the sky.

“What about this?” Her whisper is brought low by awe, lower by the thought that she may have dreamed so much, and lived so very few of her memories. For a beat, she doesn't read recognition in his eyes. She thinks she imagined that day in the forest, when he pierced the sky. Then his fist clenches and she feels a pulse dodging through his veins.

“That is not beauty.” The fist unfolds, petal by petal. A star sits at the center of his palm, fighting against the sun. The brightness contrasts the beating gold light. Nothing is beautiful. Everything is dry. “I'm not creating this. I don't create an arm or a leg. I can't be proud of what's just a part of me.”

Tigerlily holds him in her memory. She has held him there for months, and the habit is hard to break. She pulls it now from where it has embedded itself, entwined with her desires, and pushes it to her arms, fingers, tender. She cradles his head in her lap. He doesn't shiver. His face turns small fractions of an inch into her thigh. The world wouldn't notice.

Caster mutters something not strong enough to make it to her ears.

“What?”

“I said he hasn't left yet.”

“Who hasn't?”

“My best friend. The smart one. The funny one. The tormented artist. Brig's still here.”

“Oh, Caster. Let him go.”

“It's not me that keeps him here.”



Brig searches for feathers. He paces. His corridor is dark, bordered on the edges by the green arboretum. Water trickles through a boring stream that is fed by nothing, feeds nothing. If he squints his eyes, the

bright waking world flickers past. He doesn't even blink. Fear for missing something small and speaking.

"Where are you? Why do you hide from me?"

He pounces on a tiny piece of bracken that seemed to twitch at his question. Nothing. Just living muck and grass, dirty and intangible.

Caster is beginning to cry. Brig can hear every single splash and stutter of a word. He stops his ears with steel fingers.

"Nothing is mine." It's not just a thought; but words fully formed along Brig's choked smog synapses. My room isn't mine. My life isn't mine. My life isn't life. "Is this what you wanted me to learn, God?" Not the humble, penitent question of a monk on his sleeping mat, broken and ready to be reformed. Though soft, Brig's words melt through every gauze wall of peace that someone drapes on a beautiful day.

There is no answer. The splashing of Caster's tears is louder, now roaring, now pausing, the broken pipe of a hesitant farmer.

"No, Cast. It's my game. The vulnerable soul. It never worked for you before. You just weren't born with the right features to look haunted. This is my game, my point."

He turns. He stands in front of his best friend, whose head is still in Tigerlily's lap. Then the strength changes sides, and Tigerlily begins to bow. Her wrist is open to the sky. Scars leap out in the heat. Brig waits for his moment to step in. Impatience well contained is a virtue. Caster holds open a palm, and for a moment he scowls at the light. He turns his palm down. The light still scratches at and sneaks around the edges, but isn't met with a scowl, or even a glance. With his eyes trying to draw her tears to him, Caster lets his cold, bright hand rest on her scars.

Brig starts to become a spear, to stab a blood revenge into Caster's heart.

It is worthless.

Nothing flows between Tigerlily and Caster; nothing visible, nothing invisible, nothing hovering between the two in trite half-beauty. Brig, with his different sense of vision, can see and feel nothing like a rope stretch between the two twice-haunted minds. Their wounds touch. And that's all.

Brig finds himself smaller without trying. He could fit into the space between their lips. He doesn't. Now he couldn't.

The kiss ends, softer than it began. Two eyes open, hold two beautiful eyes. Weakness and strength give up the fight, and just exist blanketed by peace that dulls the pain.

Ghostly eyes close, and something like a darker shade of happiness paints across Brig's face. With a touch, with a hope, I hate you, my friends. Brig imagines himself in five years, hovering through their small house, shifting his eyes from everything anger at the back of Caster's head to adoration, crushed under Tigerlily's heel. He feels tired already.

Caster looks over Tigerlily's shoulder, and sadness overturns the peace. Brig lets jealousy fill every feature he controls. He holds it there, hoping Caster understands when he says,

"I am so glad that you are alive." The echoes never fade.

Brig turns in the infinite space between zero and one-hundred-eighty. The jealousy hangs in the air as Caster strokes Tigerlily's hair. It fades, slower than the sunlight; but when the sun goes down, there is nothing left heavier than a pair of submerging memories.

Tigerlily's room is the mess of a girl who was frantic to pack and get out the door. Brig sits on the bed. He opens a drawer in the bedside table. Razor blades. There is no light for them to catch. They're sharp enough to slice through the dark. A hand, not a hand, reaches and grabs them, and they are willingly lifted from uneasy rest.

Brig puts one to his arm and presses. A point of dark, red blood. He starts crying. The cut is fast, too fast for pain. Everything is red.

Everything is white. Brig's mind trembles into nothing. And a voice says, soft as a feather,
"This."

REJECTED

The Callows let me join up because I was good at telling their stories back to them. My mum passed on before I graduated, and I needed a place to stay. The Callows took me in when I told them I knew words, like virtue and violent, and could use them right. They kept me after I scared Old Tina under a blanket with a story about sad murderers. Most of the others thought it was funny.

They weren't my kind of people. I didn't talk much to them, aside from the stories. They called me Quiet Archie, and let me sleep on the outside of the huddle, so half my body stayed warm at night.

Someone decided I should be in Old Tina's gaggle. Probably Old Tina, to get back at me for making her skin prickle in front of the others. I told her I wasn't picking on her, and she told me to learn how to lift wallets, or I'd be gone.

Apart from me, Old Tina's gaggle had Durn, Broke, and Layla. Durn and Broke were twins, and had twin open sores on their cheeks from eating out of the wrong charity lines. When he met me, Durn pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek and made pus come out the wound. Broke had good ideas, and talked about them with Old Tina all the time. He was kind of a brain, and he knew it, and I could tell it made him scared, all that blood in his head instead of his fists. I wasn't a brain — I just told good stories — but I kind of knew how he felt.

Layla was something different. She had two long, brown knots in her hair, hand-tied and foaming curls and tangles. We were kind of like twins, too — she did everything I didn't, acted out on everything that made me look at my shoes. She talked all the time. We were like two halves of a split genetic code. Everyone knew she'd take over the gaggle after Old Tina got graduated. Old Tina was doing her best not to, probably just for that reason.

It was enough. For as much as Old Tina growled at me, she did double to Layla. Layla scored more panhandling than any of us because she was prettier and knew how to pout. When Old Tina tried, her face just sucked into a grimace she couldn't shake loose. Like a puppy, I took to following Layla around on days that Old Tina didn't give me something else to do.

One time, the summer after I joined up, she and I were strolling along a sidewalk in a so-so suburb. We were visiting the cul-de-sacs and asking for donations, but really keeping an eye out for lazy housewives and unlocked doors. That had been bath day at one of the Callows' shelters, so Layla and I both smelled like skin and new sweat. We hit nuclear families and got a few packs of cigarettes, because we told them they were like money. So, we smoked through the stands of

catalpa and Russian olive and mostly kept off the grass. I was pretty happy, kind of full, a little high, but Layla wanted more to take back to Old Tina. I told her what I remembered of the grasshopper and the ants.

“Just one more,” said Layla. She pointed at a red brick one-storey which was built like a cube in the middle of a yard of fresh asphalt. There wasn't any grass, but part of the driveway was painted green.

“Looks poor,” I said.

“Relative to you,” said Layla with a grin. She pulled me up the walk. I complained that my feet were tired, because I thought maybe we were at that place where she would give me sympathy. She didn't. She glared at me and pushed me at the doorbell. I rang it. It was old tech, audio-only. The track was some laughter, high-pitched and cracking like a little dog's bark. Layla put her ear to the door as the sound faded. She shook her head; no one was moving inside. I rang the laughter-bell again.

Layla put her hand on the door knob. “I heard someone say, Come in,” she said. Turned out the door wasn't locked. Layla was the first through, so I got to watch her jump about three feet through her skin when the voice said, “Welcome to the pit of terror,” and cackled.

Layla had a fist-shiv cocked and ready before she had stopped cussing, and I had a grin that hurt my teeth. “That wasn't you,” she said, and a little of the blood drained out of her eyes.

“Nope,” I said.

“You tell anyone,” she said and raised her fist a bit more.

“Nope,” I said. I stepped into the house. “Welcome to the pit of terror,” said the crackly voice. It was lo-fi, like bounced radio. I looked down at my feet. There was a black box the size of a street puck glued to the door frame, and a speaker mounted on

the wall above it. I kicked my foot out in front of the box. "Welcome to the pit of terror."

Layla laughed just to prove she could get there first and told me to heel. The rest of the house was quiet. It smelled like a spiced pie, strong enough to burn out my senses. I could tell that once I left the house everything would be dull for a few hours, same as after leaving one of the run down kitchens.

"Quiet, you," said Layla, and led me into the kitchen. We padded on the balls of our feet, squeaking a little over the linoleum. "It's a man," said Layla. She pointed at the counter tops. They were filthy with old dishes and rotten food. We started picking over the stuff, breathing through our mouths, just in case there was anything good, like bone china or wine. I opened the refrigerator; its light was burnt out. It held row upon row of liter bottles of water, and an open box of baking soda. "Check this out," said Layla. She had a small metal basket in her hands. The basket was full of pill bottles, white, and amber, and blue glass. She gave it all a good shake, and it was like castanets.

Someone screamed. I shook my foot, but didn't see any more little black boxes. Layla said, "Down, boy," and then someone screamed again. The sound trickled out into a dozen syllables of pleading, and then there was a meaty thud. I expected an echo, but there wasn't one. Instead, there was full silence, like inside a lead box.

Layla pushed me a couple steps forward. There was a crystal sphere hanging in the kitchen window, and I spun it as I went past. Slivers of rainbows, like tears in cloth, blurred color around the room. It reminded me of the hospital where mum died. The nurses kept the windows flung wide, polarized glass letting in a soft glow that was supposed to make her feel like heaven wasn't so bad, or something.

There was another scream, and Layla shoved me through the archway that led from the kitchen to the rest of the house to see what was going on. She stayed behind the frame, pawing through the basket of meds.

I came face to with a living room. It wasn't much of a place for the living. There was black velvet on the walls, red bulbs screwed into the bare sockets overhead, fake spiders with big goggle-eyes, a coffee table in the shape of a casket, and an old man folded under a deep purple blanket sitting in a recliner. There were two threads of red juice out of the corners of his mouth, and his head was bowed. His skin was pink and splotchy and looked as if it didn't quite fit him. He was watching the television.

"Hey," I said.

"There's some good shit, here," said Layla. "Good money."

The old man breathed in through his nose so long and hard it tipped his head clean back. His mouth fell open and he started to snore. His eyes were closed. The television screamed.

"Hey," I said, and took a step forward. The man's eyes slit open; I could see a thin reflection under each lash, but he was trying hard not to let me. "You all right?" I asked.

"He's a cat," said Layla. "Rank vegetable. Come on. We should tell Old Tina." I could hear that she wanted to be talked out of it, so I just plain ignored her. The old man's head flopped toward me; his skin sloshed waves like a deflated balloon.

"You're new," he said.

"Brand new," said Layla, coming out from behind the archway. Her hands were empty, but her pockets were full. "What are you doing all dead like that?"

"I'm Shooter," said the old man. "Do you have my pills? I need my pills."

I looked at Layla. She shrugged at me. “Just a sec,” I said to Shooter. I ducked back into the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” asked Layla. “Tell him he’s out. He won’t know. He’ll order more for us to lift.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” I said. “My mum was in the hospital. You say you’re out, they let you be out until your chart says it’s okay to have another refill. Got to give him some of it.”

“None of this,” said Layla. “I know some about medicine, too. This will buy long showers for all the Callows. Do something for Durn and Broke, maybe.”

“Maybe it’s just for his skin,” I said. I looked in the medicine basket. Layla had left a couple of worthless bottles of herbal supplements, and a blister pack of B-complexes. “Should have taken these,” I said, giving her the B-pills. I tapped out a handful of Echinacea and something that smelled like raw liver and held them in my fist. “All right, Shooter,” I said, stepping into the living room. I held out the pills. The old man stared at them, arranged in a dense constellation on the puffed-out palm of his hand.

“Something’s missing,” he said. Layla came up behind me with a glass of water, which she gave to Shooter. He took the pills one by one, placing them into the pouch of his lip as if they were dips from a tobacco tin, and swallowing them back with sips from the glass. Layla glared at me, and I looked away from her. Shooter’s skin was creeping me out, so my eyes settled on the only other movement in the room: the television. The images were black-and-white; there was blood, but it was a metal gray and made me think of bad nano.

Shooter swallowed his last pill and smacked his lips. “I stopped paying,” he said. “Last girl stole from me. Damn kids.” I nodded, absently, and watched a

young woman tear her flimsy nightgown. "What are you doing here?" Shooter asked.

"Final visit," said Layla. She always could lie off the top of her head. "Need anything?"

"How do I look?" asked Shooter.

"I'd do you," said Layla. Shooter laughed, and he was much more comfortable with it than he was with his skin. It rumbled and echoed and didn't fit with the television at all.

"What are you watching?" I asked him.

"This. You've never seen this?" said Shooter. "God, sometimes I'm disappointed," he continued after a pause for breath. "Not even horror has survived your generation."

"Give me a good reality," said Layla. "That's life. Not this shit."

"I like it," I said. That got another chuckle from Shooter and a snort from Layla.

"Come on," she said. "It's time for us to leave."

I tore myself away from the screen and gave Shooter a small wave.

He raised a tired hand to wave back. "You live well when you're scared," he said, almost like an apology. It bothered me, the way he said it, so I had my hands in my pockets, thinking, all the way out to the street. Layla hit me on the shoulder. She rattled like a bone girl with every step, because of the meds.

"We're coming back," she said.

"You got all the good stuff," I said.

"He's all by himself," she said, and that was the end of the argument. If I fought her on it, Old Tina would hear, and accuse me of holding back on the good of the gaggle.

When we got back to the Callow hideout, we told Old Tina about the whole score. She listened hard — I tried to tell the story right, but Layla kept interrupting me, rushing me to the good parts quicker.

I gave up and let her spill. She brought out the pills as a grand finale, and Old Tina looked them over good.

“Wide open?” asked Old Tina.

“As can be,” said Layla.

Old Tina tapped open one of the bottles and tipped its contents into her palm. She swirled them around with one finger while she turned something over in her mind. “Give it to the twins. They can sell this stuff in no time. But we’re hitting the park tonight.”

“Bad idea,” said Layla. “Cold tonight. Be like Alaska, population and temp.”

“But a greater potential,” said Old Tina. “You want to stick with dives and dead folks, you have to take me out of the gaggle.” She leaned toward Layla and I saw something flash in both their eyes. “I aim to take Callows way past your suburbs, little girl. I dream big.”

“I don’t need to,” said Layla.

The sun went down about then, and the hideout felt suddenly smaller. I excused myself, more polite than I had to, and went off to find Durn and Broke to tell them about our haul. I was telling Durn a story about how a kid’s face froze because of all the pignoses he pulled when some kid from another gaggle came running through, crowing, “Fight! Fight!”

It was a rite of dominance. Layla and Old Tina were in crouches in the middle of a expanding, contracting ring of other Callows. I couldn’t see much of the fight itself, because the audience kept pushing me out to the fringe. They did the same to Durn and Broke. Apparently, gaggle members weren’t supposed to see, in case they helped out in the fight. Weapons came out — I could hear metal scraping like a claw on a tooth — but most of the screams that followed were deep breaths from the gut. I didn’t really want to see

what was going on, except that I wouldn't be able to tell the story right to anyone who might ask.

It ended in frustration, a pair of arms thrown up in resignation, and the grumbles of a crowd denied its blood. Old Tina had lost by the rules, given up on her own terms. She pushed through the crowd and knocked me in the shoulder on her way out, not like a friend, but like clearing the last obstacle. I watched her go.

Layla came up behind me. "Saw it coming," she said.

"I didn't," I said.

"Big head, small world," said Layla. "Get the twins. We're going back to Shooter's."

The twins had disappeared before the fight was over, more concerned with selling the meds than in catching on to the politics, so Layla and I waited for them to come back. Durn came in first, and said he had punched some guy in the nuts and sold him a handful of the stuff as pain relievers. Layla scolded him for undervaluing the stuff, and he popped a zit at her and said something about Old Tina, which Layla ignored. Broke wandered in a few minutes later with both pockets full of money. "Doubled the volume," he said to me with a grin as Layla counted the bank notes. "One pocket of pills, two pockets of bills."

Layla slipped her hands down her pants and stowed the money in a secret pocket. Durn and Broke didn't watch her, but I did, and I got a show and a scowl. When she pulled up her jeans again, I could see the rectangular outline of the money through the fabric, and so could everyone else, but they'd have to cut her to get at it.

It was two in the morning before we got underway to Shooter's house. There was dew on the streets, turning the asphalt to ink. Broke and Layla walked in the front, strategizing. Durn and I followed

behind, taking turns at complaining about our empty stomachs. When we were a block away from Shooter's, Layla turned to us and said, "Callows eat when they eat." It was one of Old Tina's lines.

Broke looked at the house and shrugged big. "Whatever," he said. "Doesn't look bad. Lights are on. It's one on four, so let's go."

"Dig in," said Layla. She led the way, with Durn at her heels. Broke hung back with me.

"You ought to be up there," he said.

"They've got it," I replied.

Durn was best at picking locks, so he crouched in front of the door and got to work as Broke and I ambled up. Layla crouched near Durn, getting in his light, and hissing orders. First one deadbolt then another were shot back into their shells. The knob turned easily, and Layla got the chain with a pair of handheld wire cutters.

"Someone must have come by," I said, quietly tapping on one half of the dangling chain.

"Or he got up," said Layla. She disappeared behind the door; Durn and Broke jumped out of their skins as the electronic voice said, "Welcome to the pit of terror." I wondered why the hell we had been keeping quiet if we were just going to walk right on in. Broke recovered first and peered down at the black box, as I had done, while Durn started giggling and wagging his foot through the infrared beam. Layla caught him in the ear and shushed him. We all followed her inside.

The lights in the kitchen were on, and they made everything else that much blacker. We couldn't see more than a foot into the living room.

"What was wrong with this guy?" asked Durn.

"Looked like he was shrinking," I said. "Except his skin stayed the same size."

Layla led the way into the kitchen. We started opening cabinets, searching for anything of value. I found plastic plates and cups, a set of camp silverware, and a bottle of gin with less than a shot glass' worth in the bottom. Durn and Broke found soap and were fighting over bits of it to rub into their sores. Layla got frustrated fast and stopped talking in whispers.

“Archie,” she said. “Go check out the living room.” I didn't have a point from which to argue, so I tossed her the gin and mouse-stepped through the archway. The living room was populated with dull the black shapes of furniture and wisps of wind from some unseen vent. “Go faster, scaredy-man,” said Layla. “Even he could call the cops.”

I fumbled my hand along the wall and found the familiar plastic of a light switch. I gave it a click. Fluorescent tubes that hadn't seen life in a while stuttered bright. “Shit,” said a voice. I shaded my eyes while they adjusted and looked toward the voice.

Shooter was sitting in his chair with a police-grade pistol cocked in his right hand. He looked as if he had been half-boiled in vinegar. His skin was puffy and bruised in some places, drum-head tight and thin in others. Huge blisters had formed on his face and arms, but they were bloodless. It looked as if bubbles of air had been blown between his dermal layers. “What are you doing here?” he asked. The gun was a little shaky.

“Take it easy, man,” I said. I tried to think of something to tell him to get him to lower the gun, but all my stories took off right about then. The only thing I could remember was the smell of the room in which my mother had died, and how it seemed to make the bones in all my fingers melt.

With a muttered, “You find anything?” Layla peeked around the archway. I glanced at her just in time to watch her scream. Even though I could see it

coming, the rest of my bones went the way of my fingers and I just about fell into the television set. “What the hell is that?” cried Layla.

Shooter's face went all loose, like a sheet in the wind. He was trying to make some expression, but I couldn't tell what it was. My heart was chattering like a bird's because of the gun, no matter the strength or disposition of its owner. “Hey, Layla,” I said.

Durn and Broke had come to check out the commotion. Durn shrieked like a girl, worse than Layla had, but Broke just stood there with wide eyes, methodically stroking one of the sores on his cheek. All four of us might as well have been stuck to the floor. Layla's face was contorting through several recognizable expressions, in at least as much flux as Shooter's. I leaned back against the television set, because my legs were shaking, and felt as if they would only be shaking harder in the near future.

Shooter's eyes went back and forth across us and he lowered the gun. He put both his hands against the arms of the chair and started to lever himself up. The skin on his wrists folded and stretched like the scruff of a shar-pei. He winced and I heard a quiet, wet tearing. A fold of gray flesh had sloughed off his arm as the bones and muscles beneath twisted. I felt all the bile in my stomach and hoped it would stay there. Shooter dropped himself back into his chair and, after a moment, reclaimed the gun.

“Get out of my house,” he said. Durn had calmed down a bit, so he sneered at Shooter, flipped him off, and stomped back into the kitchen. Broke followed him a moment later. Layla's mouth was open in some combination of horror and fascination, so I nudged her with one of my jittery legs. She closed her mouth. Then, glancing once at me as if for confirmation, she pinched her nose. She started to sneeze, a big fake

windup to a massive explosion. She blew saliva all over the room, and then she laughed.

I was the last one out of the room. “Want the light off?” I asked Shooter.

“Leave it on,” he said.

I should have turned around when I left, but I couldn't break off my stare. I just stepped backward, leaving Shooter alone with his fake cobwebs, his purple-and-orange lampshades, his gun, and something of his that grew like a chuckle.

“Welcome to the pit of terror,” the electronic voice cackled four times as we left.

“We come back after he's dead,” Layla said, and led us off to dive in the dumpsters.

Later that morning, I was telling a bedtime story to my gaggles and whoever else was nearby. The story went like this: “We were two steps in when our breathing stopped. It was too quiet to breathe in there, like sneezing in a line-up. I went first and slipped on something wet. The darkness stank of dog shit and landfills, and now my shoe stank, too. I was just gonna whisper to Layla that the coast was clear, if she watched her step, when something touched me on the neck. Not like a bug or a piece of hair, but cold like the tip of a screwdriver. The lower half of me jumped — you know, like when your muscles all spaz that once before you go to sleep. Someone coughed, a sick cough, full of phlegm or vomit, and the cold against my neck branched and multiplied. Five points rested across my arteries, like five fingers.

“That's when Layla hit the lights. Hold your stomachs. We were standing in the kitchen, and it looked worse than Bromide's downtown. There was this soup on the floor, like tomato mixed with split-pea. Looking at it was like looking at a wrong tag, you know, something that tells you you're out of Callow territory.

“Then I saw what was touching me, and I knew I wouldn't ever feel like I was home again. It was man, sized and shaped, but so dead there should have been flies. It had eyes like greasy soup hanging down at its cheeks on these thin optic nerves like harp strings. Its mouth was hanging open, with sugar-black teeth. It wasn't breathing, but I something that smelled awful drifted up out of its throat, and I gagged.

“I didn't scream, but I did have to gag down a cup or so of bile. I took a step back and the thing's fingers slid right off my skin, as if they were made of slick plastic. It took a step forward, and I swear to holy sustenance it moaned. I said something to Layla, but it didn't matter because Layla was already out of there. All of them were. I didn't waste my breath in breathing more of that shit; I took off after them. We ran until we couldn't smell no more, and that was only after I kicked my shoes off.”

I beamed at my audience, only a few of which bothered to look down at my feet to see that, yes, I was still wearing my ratty old shoes. A few of the youngsters made faces at me to prove how little they believed. “Tell us another,” said a girl from another gaggle, so I told the one about the toad and heaven.

Afterward, I looked around for Layla and the twins. I was hungry. I found Durn first, but he wasn't interested in going out. He was trying to make time with two girls. He spit blood at me to scare me off and grinned with red teeth.

I found Broke at the well. He was getting a drink of water. After he was done, he dropped a tablet of something in after the bucket. He turned around and saw me. “Iodine,” he said.

“You seen Layla?” I asked.

“You're all right,” said Broke. “Layla thinks so, too. But you're out of the gaggle. She asked me to tell you.” He looked as if he didn't mind the duty.

"Because of the story," I said.

"It wasn't a very good story," said Broke.

"No, not really," I said. "It worked, though."

"You made fun of Durn and me and Layla, and none of us can figure out why. I don't care much, and Durn doesn't barely know it, but Layla took it bad, man. She stood up for you against Old Tina, when you didn't know it, and you turned her into a 'fraidy-cat in front of other Callows."

"That's not what it did," I said. "What it did was scare people."

"Why would you want to do that?" asked Broke. "Scared kids don't get food, and Callows don't get scared."

"He pointed the gun at me," I said. "I got scared."

"You're out of the gaggle," Broke repeated. He turned away, adding, "You could have stood up for her."

Feeling a bit like the world was too large to fit my body, I ambled around the hideout for a while, figuring I'd run into Layla sooner or later. Everyone who met my eyes had one of two reactions: either they grinned at me, a little like Durn had, or they blinked like they were high on junk they couldn't afford and then passed me as if I were invisible.

I found Layla outside. She was kicking at a piece of rusted metal. "There's a monster called tetanus," I said.

"What do you want?" she asked dully.

"I don't know," I said. "Just to talk."

"Don't tell me no stories," she said.

"I didn't mean nothing bad," I said.

She met my eyes and stamped hard on the metal, sending a strained tone to both our ears. "You think about the wrong things," she said. "You think about what words mean, 'stead of what words do, and you

get distracted. You talk to old men 'stead of lifting their china. You scare the wrong people. You didn't grow up Callow, and you can't stay Callow." She rushed by me with one hand to her cheek. Her fingers were spread wide, and I saw a red sore underneath, like those on the twins. She needed medicine, but none of them knew how to ask for it. She slammed the door to the hideout just behind her and I heard something scrape up against it. I gave it a knock or two; it was blocked up tight. There were other doors, but I didn't feel like trying them. I was out of the Callows. I cared about as much as I do at the ends of stories, which is to say, not hardly.

Nervousness, resignation, and something righteous all had settled in my stomach like rubble, but they weren't enough to fill me up. My stomach growled at me every time I took a step. I headed for the nearest kitchen, but it was locked up, and there were young Callows outside that already knew to give me dirty looks. I tried a couple other kitchens, but they were all locked, too, and without Durn my chances of breaking and entering were dead as lies.

There was one door I knew wouldn't be locked. The sky was lightening toward gray when I got to Shooter's house. I knocked and pushed the door open a crack. I triggered, "Welcome to the pit of terror" a couple of times. I called out, "Mister Shooter, it's me."

"Come to finish the job," came a voice from the living room.

"That's right," I said, and then felt a little stupid because it might have been the television speaking.

I crept into the kitchen. It was cold; the linoleum seemed to be pumping ice right through the thin soles of my shoes. "Thanks for not shooting me," I said, sending the words out as a sort of vanguard to test the resistance.

“No problem,” said Shooter. A dim light from the living room switched on silently. I followed it to its origin, a small lamp on an end table next to Shooter's chair. The man himself was wrapped up in a blanket, only his eyes visible.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“You kids took my pills,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said.

Shooter coughed and twisted his face away from me. I heard a wet tearing sound, like damp paper being stripped into segments for papier-mâché. “I needed those pills,” he said when it was over.

“I know,” I said. “I'm sorry for the others. I'm not with them anymore. But you don't seem too broken up about it.”

The blanket fell away from his face as he turned to stare at me. I had gagged earlier that night when I saw him; this time my whole body shivered. My eyes filmed over for just a second, to blur out the mess, and then they cleared again. Shooter's cheeks were missing — not empty air, but the top layers of skin were gone and I could see the ruby-fading-to-pink of fresh wounds. A limp sheet of gray flesh curved from his forehead, nearly covering his eye. He raised a hand to brush it away and I saw brown, gray, and green all mottled on his fingers and wrist. There was a gleam of white bone as he flexed his knuckles.

He stared at me for a long moment, holding the hank of skin out of the way. Then he grinned, a wide sharky grin, and said, “You don't run.”

“Not much,” I said. “I walk, mostly.”

“That's the trouble with you kids, ones I've met. Wouldn't know to get out of the way of a speeding train, were you on the tracks.”

“Last longer than you would,” I said. Shooter chuckled to himself, but didn't do anything more. “What's wrong with you?” I asked.

"Disgust wearing off?" asked Shooter. I shrugged. "It's a good story." His consonants were beginning to slur. "Let's see if I can't get you back on track. It'll be my good deed for the day. You know the factory out past the bridge?"

"Some gang lives there."

"Not yours?" asked Shooter. "Well, it used to be where I worked. It was a steel plant. We poured girders for building skyscrapers with. Main room's so big it has it's own weather, something like twenty stories high, a few acres on the ground. I worked on the highest catwalks, maintaining the gears on the pots that poured the molten steel into the channels. Shooter with his grease gun. I worked there twenty years, you know. Had blisters on my calluses, and calluses damn near everywhere.

"Statistics is what got me. You gotta watch out for those. Time I started, there were twelve of us grease monkeys. By the time my story takes place, eleven of them had taken out liability claims, and seven of those were on disability thanks to accidents. I was the last man standing, kinda. But statistics caught up with me. The day it happened, I was on storey seventeen, working on a crankshaft. I was standing in the wrong place, too near the channel, and the automated bucket started pouring while I was standing right in front of it. I got out of the way of the steel, but the bucket tipped me over. I fell, god, I don't know how many storeys. I ended up on my back, staring up into these glimmering shadows, all red from the light of the steel. I had the wind right out of me." Shooter laughed and shook his head; the way the skin of his face moved was obscene, like unwanted nudity. "Then I did the dumbest thing in my life. I rolled over to catch my breath. Guess where I was. Yeah, right next to one of the channels. I rolled myself over into liquid steel. Didn't get too deep, luckily. Had a buddy,

a new guy — I think he's still working for the company — came and helped me out.

“Most of what I remember after that comes in the hospital. seventy-percent of my skin was cooked right off, and the rest of it wasn't healing right, so they needed to do a full-body skin graft. Problem is, skin's just an organ like everything else, and my body rejected the transplant. That's what the pills were for, to fool my body into accepting the skin.”

“Where'd you get it all?”

Shooter leaned forward and grinned at me. “We waited in alleys for children like you.” I closed my eyes and, after a moment, I heard him sit back in his chair. “Moral of the story is don't work in steel, kid.”

“My name's Quiet Archie,” I said.

“Good name for you.” I opened my eyes just as Shooter closed his. “What scares you, Quiet Archie?”

I thought about that for a while. While I did, Shooter breathed evenly. “I'm scared that if I don't get something to eat, my stomach will digest itself,” I said.

“No,” said Shooter. “You're scared of the hunger of the beast that would drive you to murder, just to fill your belly.”

“Sure, okay,” I said.

“There's bread in the kitchen,” he said.

I went to get a piece. I ate it out of sight of Shooter, and then returned to his side. He was asleep. A brush of gray light was touching the windows, so I turned the lamp off and made my way to a corner over a heating vent. I curled up and went to sleep smelling the bread on my fingers.

I woke up to the sound of screaming. Shooter had the television on again. His show was in black-and-white, and was zoomed up close on a young girl's eyes. While I was out, he had switched on several chains of orange and black fiber-optic lights; they webbed across one wall like the home of a giant

spider. I heard wind outside pressing against the walls and making them creak.

“Happy Halloween,” said Shooter.

“What's that?” I asked.

“When I was a kid, last day of October was Halloween. You dress up scary, you make girls fall in love with your courage, you steal candy from children, you try to scare each other to death.”

“I'd get you there,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Shooter. He paused his movie, leaving the poor girl frozen in front of a monster with a long face.

“I can get you more pills,” I said.

“It's too late,” said Shooter. He grinned at me again. “I'm in the worst pain I've ever been in my life, and I just can't help but grin. I got up and looked at myself in the mirror while you were asleep. I haven't been able to stand up that long for a year, at least.”

“Let me get you some more pills,” I said.

Shooter shook his head and looked away, toward the window, to sever any of those conversation threads. “It's getting dark,” he said. “Tell you what—” he faced me again “—there's a camera in my bedroom. Why don't you go get it.”

“Okay,” I said.

He pointed toward one of the doors exiting the living room. I headed toward it. “I keep a woman locked in a box under my bed,” he added. I knew he was lying, but, after finding the camera sitting charged in cradle on an old wooden dresser, I kicked up the filthy blankets and took a quick peek.

“What am I doing with this?” I asked as I handed the camera to him.

“Hang on to it,” he said. “It's better than words.” He levered himself up out of the chair. As he stood as straight as he could manage, I heard a wet plop. Part of his scalp had fallen to the floor. “Leave it,” he said.

Then, "I hope not everyone out there is as docile as you."

He led me through the kitchen, triggered the "pit of terror", and stood for a moment on his front walk, breathing as deeply as he could. He was dressed in filthy, stained pajamas. He tried to unbutton the shirt, but his fingers slipped and bunched over the task. He grunted deeply and tore the fabric, exposing a back that looked like a skinned cat. "Let's go," he said. "Turn the flash on, and get ready."

I followed him at about twenty paces. He shambled through the gloom between streetlights with a limp and a few sentences of muttered pain. At the end of the block, I saw a pair of young girls playing with chalk on the concrete. They were up past their bedtime, and I could hear them giggling as if they knew it. Shooter raised his arms so his elbows were locked out straight, his hands dangling from his wrists. As he approached the girls, I crossed the street to get a better look. Shooter went dark in the shadow and then emerged, moaning terribly into halogen light. The girls looked up as one, and I flashed the expressions on their faces. Shooter took another step closer, and I flashed them again. A small puddle had formed beneath the girls, and one of them dropped everything she had to cry. The other stood up and ran. She pounded on a door as Shooter lowered himself behind a bush. The door opened and the girl slipped inside. I heard someone say, "Who are you—" before the door closed.

I crossed the street to rejoin Shooter, who was laughing so hard he had pissed his pants. They clung to his malformed legs. He was trying to be quiet, but he wasn't very good at it. "Did you see them?" he gasped. I said that I had. "Come on," he said. "Let's do some more." I agreed.

We haunted the neighborhood for a couple of hours, spreading ourselves out, never getting caught by the adults. I had nearly filled the card when we arrived back at Shooter's house. He was having to hang on to me, and I was having to breathe through my mouth because he stank so bad.

"Here," he wheezed. "Set me down here." I was more than glad to. We collapsed on his front walk, and he kept laughing so I joined in. "Show me the pictures," he said. I set the camera to review and handed it to him. His face was illuminated, made more hideous by the angled light from the display. He giggled like a little boy, muttering things like, "Oh, her expression is priceless," and, "Did you see him run." He kept laughing and laughing, and then I noticed that blood was trickling down from his eyes. He died with his mouth open, with his hands loose around the camera.

I left him outside to frighten the police. I pawed through his movie collection before I left, grabbing a few things to sell on the streets, and took what was left of the bread. I didn't take the camera because, despite what Shooter said, I thought that words were better.

I walked into the city, stopping on street corners to sell my wares bit by bit. Folks gave me weird looks when I told them what I had, but some curiosity made them buy, and I managed to get rid of all I had brought. I was just considering going back for some more when I saw someone else making a sale across the street. It was Old Tina. She had her skirt hiked up and her eyes were all dark with bloody makeup. I took a look around me and realized my feet had wandered back into Callow territory. Neither Old Tina nor I were Callows, now, but we were young enough to be a threat.

A pair of guys about Old Tina's age approached her and made low gestures I could barely see. I started across the street. I waved once, but Old Tina didn't see me. She took the two guys by the hands and led them into a dark alley. I called out and got no response.

I used a corner to slip into the alley, outlining myself as little as possible against the street lights. I had picked up a few things from the Callows. As my eyes adjusted, I could make out Old Tina up against the wall, bracing herself with her hands, as the guys peered down between her legs.

"Hey," I said. "You paying?"

"Yeah," grunted one of the guys. "Wait in line." There were two of them, so I didn't try to pick anything. They shoved their money into Old Tina's mouth. I stood by a dumpster and watched until they were finished with her. I didn't think she had recognized me, but the first thing out of her mouth after the money was, "Quiet Archie. What are you doing here?"

"I'm out, too," I said.

As she counted her money, I pulled out what I had made, too. "We've got enough for a hotel room," I said with a smirk.

"Shut up," she said. Then, "Can I have it?"

I couldn't see her very well, but her outline was all hunched like Shooter, and her details were silver from reflected light. It looked as if her eyes were down. "Gotta pay for it," I said. She sighed. "No," I said. "Just listen to me for a bit." I told her a story about a virgin murderer who, out of envy, slaughters those children who have sex. I tried not to hold anything back, to work the rent flesh of Shooter into the words. Maybe I should have kept the pictures. I couldn't scare her, this time. I didn't tell it right. She punched me, as if something were all my fault, said, "There's no place

for the self-aware,” and sobbed. I touched her face to calm her down and felt wet skin. She hissed through her teeth. She turned away, and I could see the same open sore on her cheek as Durn and Broke had.

“Tell me a different story,” she said.

WE ARE TOYS

I met Emma when I was nine and she was older. I was in the park playing snakes in the grass while mother was in getting her hair done. I crawled belly-down around trees and over paths while dog-walkers and baby-strollers clicked and rolled around me. I didn't have any friends to play with — not in our city, where the people kept to themselves and smelled gray, like steel wool. There was nobody at my school I knew who could lie in the grass with me and not play guns.

I slithered around the park until my shirt was soaked clear through and I started to shiver. That's when Emma said, "What a funny game." She was sitting cross-legged on top of a picnic table nearby, leaning back on her arms like bridge struts to support herself. I didn't say anything back. She had green eyes and she used them, always moving, always blinking. I remember her skin was green, too, and I remember

that the sun came down through the trees and so everything was green. "I know a good game," she said. She slipped off the table and landed awkwardly on her feet. She almost lost her balance and grinned. "Follow me," she said.

I stood up and followed her like any other kid. She led me back into the trees, where all the other people's sounds turned into antsteps and rain. She pushed deep into a band of bushes, letting the branches snap back into my face, showering me with dew. Then she stopped and faced me. She smiled like a girl and reached her hands above my head. She shook the branches she could reach and drenched me with morning drops. I didn't complain much — I could have gotten any wetter — but I think I scowled. Emma answered it by withdrawing her hands. Clenched between them was a riot of green leaves, their angles and veins all in tangles and misunderstood shapes. She rolled the leaves in her fingers, making them dance until I almost believed that her fingers were the dead things and the leaves the living. Then she closed both hands as if she were praying, catching all the green behind her skin. She didn't pray, though. She let her eyes go back and forth all over me. When I was about to chatter my teeth on purpose, she opened her hands like a butterfly's wings.

Standing on her palm was a tiny bird, a green sparrow with twigs for legs and the spear of a birch leaf for a beak. It was as perfect and delicate as an origami animal, and, at first, that's what I thought it was.

"Teach me how to do that," I said.

Emma blew a kiss over the bird and its feathers ruffled. Its head turned and I turned to stone, as if my next breath would frighten the creature away — of, if not the creature, then the quiet birthday feeling that had filled me up.

The bird picked at its plumage and cocked its head to one side. "Have you ever seen anything like it?" asked Emma. I didn't answer, still afraid to move. "Well?" she prompted.

"No," I said.

"Good," said Emma. She sounded satisfied. She sent a ripple down her arms; when it reached her fingers, the bird took flight, leaving behind a small cloud of downy leaves. I tried to keep it in view, but I lost sight of it in the branches, or maybe it had turned into just leaves again. I didn't think so, because I could still hear the small desperate flutter of its wings.

My neck went still from staring up. Emma tucked her fingers under my chin and pulled my gaze down into her. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said, and then slipped like a cat between two shrubs. Her passage let a wisp of light into our hiding place.

When mom finished getting her hair done she said I couldn't take any leaves with me, and I had to drop two pocketfuls on the ground.

The next day, I didn't feel like getting out of bed, but mother made me anyway. She took me to church, where I didn't talk much to the other kids and she sang way louder than I did on the hymns. I told her a couple of times that I felt like throwing up, so she let me pass the sermon in the bathroom.

On the drive home, I listened to the rain and asked mother what miracles mean. She didn't understand me, though, and said, "Something wonderful that you can't explain." That made me think of maths, which isn't what she meant.

I didn't make it back to the park for almost two weeks. I missed three days of school during that time because I was sick. Mother took me to the doctor on a

Friday, and after the checkup she had to go to the drug store, so I asked if I could go to the park while she shopped. "Don't you want to look at the toys?" she asked. I told her I didn't want to and she dropped me off next to the monkey bars.

Emma was sitting at the bottom of the little kids' slide, kicking gravel with her bare feet. I didn't say, Hi, and she didn't look up.

"What took you so long?" she asked.

"I'm supposed to be in school," I said. She nodded and drew a plus sign with her big toe. "Aren't you supposed to be in school?" I asked. Instead of answering, she patted the slide beside her. I sat down. She smelled a bit like burning insulation, so I asked her if she was feeling all right.

"I am," she said. "What are you learning about in school?"

I squinted, trying to remember anything that might be more important than Emma. "We learned about Cortez last week," I said.

"Tell me about Cortez," said Emma.

I shrugged. "He killed a lot of people he shouldn't have. He brought diseases from the old world and he wiped them out without his soldiers."

"I like that story," said Emma. "It's sad."

"I could tell you others," I offered.

"I would appreciate that," said Emma. "You don't know how much."

I wanted so badly to ask her how she had made the bird out of leaves, but I was afraid that if I opened my mouth she would disappear, as she had from the bushes.

She looked up from the equations in the sand toward the sound of a barking dog. I watched her eyes trace shapes around the figures of the dog and his owner, around the old couple reading on a blanket, around everyone else but me — she seemed to be

using her stare to cut holes in the world, to section off the people she could see like cookies on a sheet.

Mother came and found me and said, "Come on." Emma gave me a wave with the tips of her fingers. "Who's your girlfriend?" mother asked after she closed the car door.

"Mom," I said, and I rolled my eyes.

It was summer the first time I tried to kiss Emma. Mother had told me to stay in bed that night, to save my strength. She said I had mono, the kissing sickness, but I figured if I had a kissing sickness I ought to at least have my first kiss.

Mother was right that I didn't have much strength, but I had enough to make it to the bus stop before service ended, and the only thing I felt wrong was a vibration in my legs every time I took a step, as though my bones were humming.

Somehow I knew she'd be waiting for me, and she was, waiting at least. She didn't notice me, even when I coughed — I couldn't help the coughing. She was standing out from under the canopy of trees, hands loosely at her sides, staring up at whichever stars she could see.

"There aren't very many," she said when I turned me head to follow her stare. With something as wide as the sky to focus on, her eyes were just about rolling from their sockets. Mine weren't; I just locked onto the brightest I could see, called it Mars, and tried to catch it moving.

"There are plenty," I said.

Emma nodded and made a smile I was sure was for me, though it was aimed toward infinity. "Would you like to see them?" she asked.

"They look just like the sun," I said.

Her hand caught mine, fingers locking into fingers. "Don't hold your breath," she said. My bones stopped humming. The weight left my body; my blood seemed to run faster and freer. I looked down. The shadowed park was gaining a shape, like the horizon accepting a curve at the right distance. I could see the slide and the monkey bars and the bike path and they all drew closer together. I couldn't help asking, "How do you do this?" Her answer was a grin.

We floated up through the grimy air, the buzz of artificial light below us, driving us further away. When we crossed out of the bed of smog it was as if a curtain had been torn away. The sky grew even larger. It was cold inside of me. Stars exploded into view like ants from a crumbling hill. My breathing slowed; it felt as if my lungs were freezing. Emma smiled and pointed with her free hand. Her lips moved, but I don't remember any of what she said. I could tell that there was heat out there in the universe; I could practically see it, but I couldn't feel the barest blush of it on my skin.

Emma took me down. I coughed when we re-entered the hanging exhalations of the city. When I could see the park and feel my lungs expanding, I tried to lean over and kiss her. She caught my face in her hand and turned both away. "Please don't spend your innocence on me," she said, and we fell the rest of the way.



While I was sick in bed I couldn't visit her, not because mother told me not to, but because I could barely get my legs to hold my body up and balanced.

A new doctor told me new things, and mother said we could afford it, whatever it was. She heard a story on the news about asbestos being blamed for an

outbreak of sickness in the area of the park, and she told me I couldn't play there anymore. To make up for it, she bought me toys and books and video games. It was nice of her to do it, but I ran out of interest in them all. My bed became a swamp of plastic and paper. I wanted Emma to visit me, but she didn't know where I lived, or even that I missed her. She must think I didn't want to see her anymore, I thought. I wondered if she cared, or if her eyes just kept on slicing fractions off the world.

Then one day I almost didn't wake up, mother told me, and I when I finally did it was in the hospital. It smelled of paint and varnish and gave me a headache. I figured I'd be able to go home that night — being so close to so many doctors should have done something to me. After dark, while the nurse turned my arm numb with her needles, mother asked me if I wanted her to stay the night. I told her I didn't want to stay the night. She promised she'd come back first thing in the morning.

I didn't sleep at all that night. The nurses clipped back and forth in the hallway, and every couple of hours they returned to put medicine in my IV and cold hands on my face and chest. I tried watching TV. A game show almost put me to sleep — almost, but not quite. I was just beginning to see dreams in the drab colors of the screen when the show went all to static and a shadow fell over my bed.

It was Emma. She padded into the room so silently that I thought she might be floating. She put her finger to her lips and made my smile stay quiet. She sat on the bed next to my shoulder and looked down at me. Even in the dark, I could see that her eyes were still, her pupils at rest on my face. I hoped I looked as strong as mother had taken to telling me I was.

"I'm sorry," Emma whispered. "I still like the sad stories."

"What are you doing here?" I whispered.

"I came to apologize," she said. "Do you remember when I took you to see the stars?" She asked it as though I could forget, as though it had been nothing more than an idle conversation on a drearily normal day. I told her that, of course, I remembered. "I spent my innocence on worlds you can't believe — neither could I, when I came to them, but I learned to. I learned everything about them. I have to apologize because I'm grateful to you for your open eyes. Your innocence is gone, and now you have no excuse for ignorance, but you have given me surprise. I have hoped for ages that I could find something that would build an unfamiliar expression on my face, a disquieting, perfect sensation in my nerves. I don't think I ever will." She was smiling as she said this and there were two tears on her face in symmetry. "But I do not discount the pleasure, and the envy, of seeing that wonderment on another person's face."

I opened my mouth to ask her things I didn't need answers for. I think I mostly just wanted her to hear my voice. She put a warm hand over my mouth and went on. "I'm sorry for what I stole from you." She withdrew her hand.

"It's all right," I said. My head was throbbing from the hospital smell and my gut had gone cold as a fist in winter. Emma smiled at me and got up to leave. I reached out a hand to stop her and, though I only brushed the fabric of her jeans, I succeeded. "Will you kiss me?" I asked, and two more perfect tears spilled over her lashes. She leaned over my body. Her dark hair fell in light waves over my face. She whispered something that I didn't catch — it sounded like a name from a history book — and then she touched

my lips with hers. She tasted like ozone, hot and important. She smelled like a tree, like the breeze of a bird's passing. She felt like fire, so hot I can barely write it, and it stayed with me long after she had slipped out of my room. I don't think I'll feel anything like that again.

THE THIRD LONG SEASON

The universe began in static. Then, as though playing through a cosmic radio, the deep, gray noise was punctured by fragments of clarity. These strung themselves together in echo, creating an impression of reality that, in one moment, was brought into full reception by the terrible decision of Whoever's hand was on the dial.

It was an appropriate image, thought Rasmir. He was leaning back in the only chair in the room, his feet up on the only desk; the rest of the observatory control room was empty, like the inside of an egg. Most of the computer equipment had been locked away in a server closet, to which Rasmir didn't have a key. All he had to worry about was the little workstation on which he noted anomalies in the inflow of data from the array of radio and optical telescopes on the hill above.

It was a lonely sort of job, but it hadn't always been so. Up until a few years ago, Rasmir had had a team of three others who had helped him maintain the equipment and collect data. It hadn't been the most cost-efficient, by modern reckoning, but the guys had had a lot of fun, isolated in their clubhouse for weeks at a time, playing cards and avoiding the phone whenever it rang.

Now, there was just Rasmir, his chair, his desk, and the static. Sometimes, he played CDs on a portable to keep the thick silence out of his ears, but right now he was waiting for something, and didn't want to miss it.

He had the timer going on his wristwatch. It was down to about a minute, rolling over toward zeroes. It had been set for roughly sixteen hours — the approximate time it took for light to reach a particular rend in space that his government had named the Rabbit Hole — but was always off by a couple minutes, plus or minus. That was because he could only set the timer by hours and minutes; it didn't have the granularity to get the seconds, or tenths of a second, or hundredths. Sometimes, the error made him think of the people who had had to come up with the first calendars.

The timer reached zero and his heart trembled a harmless arrhythmia. At least the early humans had the weather to go by; if it was the rainy season, it'd damn well be raining. All Rasmir had to go on was the static.

A flag lit up on his monitor. The mighty telescope had detected an anomaly, right on schedule. Rasmir quickly switched off the monitoring equipment through a backdoor script he had written during one of his long downtimes. What else did they expect a lonely engineer to do? No one would notice that there was a blank in the system's memory, because it took time, and therefore money, to notice. Rasmir didn't

want to run the risk of embarrassment of having these particular data stored for posterity and at the government's whimsy. The data came in, ran through the filters in his workstation, and disappeared, with no more longevity than a wave of sound.

With the processors running at full load, the data were translated from pulses of radio and visible light into the voice that Rasmir thought sounded like angels ought. He plugged his headphones into the jack on his monitor.

“This is almost an illusion of interactivity,” said the voice, right up against his eardrums. It was barely above a whisper, so there were frayed tones and torn cadences. It put Rasmir in mind of a paintbrush, a brush that could create moods in him like pictures on canvas. “Do you have staged entertainments on your planet? The audience is encouraged to remain in their seats, with their hands folded tightly in their laps. We can clap at appropriate times. If you're fortunate enough to sit close to the stage, you can smell the actors, see the sweat in motion on their cheeks, and feel the force of their words — but if you imagine that you are taking part in the entertainment, then you are imagining yourself as part of a dialogue that doesn't exist.

“Do we have a dialogue, Rasmir? It seems that we only get to be united in silences. Our voices never overlap, coming from such distances. The only time we are alike in our natures is when we are silent, in those periods of time between replies.

“But listen to me. I'm bemoaning the ability to be deliberate, to think deliberately, instead of giving over to a spontaneity that may have been regretted for long hours by the time it reaches you. I'm going to tell you a joke. I shouldn't have laughed when I heard it, but I did. Her holiness overheard me, and I had to do penance. So don't let anybody hear you, okay?”

“Here it is. What is five times four times three times two times one?”

There was a long pause, the valley in the woman's voice filled up with the hiss of white noise. Rasmir smiled. He had heard the joke before. He still chuckled when she said the punchline. “Five!” He heard her giggle and try and stifle it down. “I'm sorry, it's still as funny the second time.

“This one is going to be cut a bit short, I'm afraid. As the season runs out, more of the broadcast time is being used by the heads of the church. They're in a debate with one of your world's religious leaders — I can't remember what the religion is called — over godly retribution. And if her holiness catches me in here, unauthorized, I'm going to get a bit more of this fleshly retribution.

“It's always so good to talk to you. Love, me.”

Rasmir smiled and took off his headphones. He spent a couple of minutes searching the air for her echoes, like an anemone trailing its long fingers in the rich sea water. He composed his thoughts, and then he set up the software for the return message. As he spoke, his words were decompiled into efficient packets of radiation and streamed out toward the Rabbit Hole.

“I'm not sure which religion is arguing with you guys,” he said. “Most all of them are confused, since your world seems to have only the one deity, and are unified in its worship. That rubs all of them raw, down here.

“I don't want to waste my time talking about that stuff, though. Who knows how many of these conversations we'll be able to have. You're right: the season's almost over. It will be another year before our planets can see each other again. And even then, well, things are going bad around here with my job. You have no idea how much it upset the administration

when our search for intelligent life yielded such results. I think they were secretly hoping to get some new technologies, or confirmation of some theoretical work — something that could be turned into a weapon. It must have been a let down that we ended up finding you guys. You're just like us.

“But they don't want to spend good money on pen-pals, so I keep hearing stuff about this whole observatory losing its funding. Misappropriation, wrong path, or whatever the justification is this week. The thing is that I might not be here next year.

“I can't believe it. Sometimes I just want to take both hands and throttle someone higher up, give 'em a good demonstration of how their money doesn't do much to stop our itchy fingers.

“I don't mean that.” He leaned back in his chair and picked up the thoughts his rant had overturned. He chuckled into the microphone. “It's not exactly spontaneous, but that's about what I sounded like when I heard your joke. See, I had heard it before, but there was that dramatic pause you made — and while you were holding onto the payoff, I was right there with you, even if I was offset by sixteen hours. For a little bit, we shared the wry anticipation of the punch line. So, it's not just silence.

“For your sake, I'll cut this short.” She could never wait by the receiver, as Rasmir could, so he was often surprised that their messages weren't intercepted by someone else on her planet. He tried to keep his side of the conversation short, so she wouldn't run as much risk getting in trouble with her order, who, she told him, frowned on communicating more than necessary. Somehow, she always got his messages; what's more, she always found the time to send a reply.

“I'll be trying to dream up what you look like,” he said, hoping the curve of his lips would carry through

in the tone of his voice. "If you can send one more, please do. I'll be waiting."

"I hope you can get this. I'm cutting the window fine," said Rasmir. He hunched over his monitor, speaking quietly, though he was in no danger of being overheard. "Last year, I said I might not be back. Well, I just wanted to let you know that I am. We've still got the money. We've even got a little more. But I'm not going to be here at the observatory for a while.

"There's a comet that comes through our system every century or so. We call it the von Teuer. It's next visit is going to be in about fourteen months. It looks like it might be passing awfully close to us this time, so I've got to go to a summit with other astronomers and government types. We'll be trying to verify the path. I'll be back soon. Can you hold off on your reply for maybe a week? I'm sorry to do this, but I guessed you'd rather know than not.

"I'm going to repeat this, now, just in case I missed the window." He did so, with slight variations in the specifics of the words just because he couldn't remember precisely what he had said. He wondered if she would listen to both iterations. The thought made him suddenly lonely, but at least she wouldn't be greeted with dead air.

It was a long drive to the summit. Rasmir kept looking up at the sky and imagining her signals washing through his body.

The summit was tense with opposing speculations unsupported by middle ground. Rasmir didn't have much to contribute — he reported data, like a computer program, and then his superiors and their analogs from other nations decided what to do with those data. He spent most of his time in an

uncomfortable chair, listening. From time to time, he felt like a child, sitting in the back row of a congregation while sermons and dogmas beat into him with the force of passion and the weight of hypothesis.

The summit lasted for a week, after which the representatives from the various governments thanked the astronomers and physicists for their attendance, and then wandered off behind closed doors. Rasmir drove back to the observatory.

When he got there, he reviewed the logs of the time he had missed. A whole series of anomalies, flagged as transmissions from the sister planet, had been saved across the server farm. There hadn't been any way around that. As he ran the decryption software, Rasmir hoped that she hadn't said anything that she wouldn't mind a bored government technician stumbling over some time in the future.

"I can't wait," she said. "I know you've cautioned me against speaking when you're not there to hear it, but you don't understand. I have taken a vow of silence. We are daughters of a silent god, and so we try to emulate those qualities of his which we might conceivably attain. You fear those in authority over your job, and that your indiscretions with this equipment will be discovered. I, too, have superiors that would disapprove of my abuse of these privileges, but there is much more than that.

"I need to know that you are listening, that I'm not just babbling out into space. If there is a grander way to break my vow than this, I can't think of it, so I have to know that it's worth it. Between silent Marsuk and you, my powerless friend, I am a child whose loves cover the breadth of the universe. My prayers to Marsuk are answered with force; all I'm asking is that these prayers to you be answered with gentleness and constancy.

“Between Marsuk and you, I have all the evidence I need that we are not alone in the universe.” There was a pause and a sound like the rustling of fabric, and then the transmission cut off. Her chastisement had become another sinking feeling in Rasmir's stomach, which had been steadily descending since first word of von Teuer's dangerous path. Feeling as if he had lead weights on his fingers, he searched forward in the archives and uncovered another set of flagged data.

“The door opened, and I found I wasn't alone in the universe.” He heard a wry humor in her voice. “It's all right. Nobody saw what I was doing. But I'd probably better go, just in case. I hope your meetings went all right. Love, me.”

How long had she been waiting? Rasmir checked the time stamp. This message had come in just a couple days after he had left. He chewed on his lower lip while he considered what he would say. There was one thing that preserved the illusion of interactivity: there wasn't any taking back the words he chose, not unless he could stretch his gathering arms around the whole curved universe.

“The comet will pass within a hundred miles of us,” he said with his head down. “At that distance, we don't know exactly what will happen. We'll lose some of our atmosphere — maybe all of it. Von Teuer will just peel it away.

“You shouldn't compare me your god. Gods have no need to depend on variables, or to hang their lives on moving targets. We have legends, here, of gods who squabble over territories in the heavens and down in the dirt with their worshipers, and their only worries are for each other. Nothing in the sky or soil can upset a god.

“I'm sorry. You didn't even call me a god. I'm just over-correcting, I guess. I've always done that. I compensate by double what is necessary. With one of

my girlfriends, when she got angry at me, I would eat ramen for a month to save enough to take her to a dinner, and even then I could only afford breadsticks for myself. I don't know. This is a good time not to be alone.

“Maybe pray for me.”

Rasmir hadn't shaved in weeks. His neck and face were covered in dark brown hairs, curled with unwashed sweat. He had his head propped up with both hands, but every few seconds he would shift weight and twist one arm around so he could read his wristwatch. It read seventeen hours, plus change.

He listened to the white hiss of electronics and air being forced through the vents. He needed to stretch his legs and he needed to go to the bathroom, but he couldn't make himself get out of his chair. It wouldn't hurt to wait another second, to watch another blur of numbers click through zero to nine on his watch. After that, another second wasn't much to ask. The important thing was not to watch too closely, or his mind would slice the time thinner and thinner, to hundredths of a second, thousandths, until he became aware of the passage of moments as an analog process, like the flow of a river, which has no borders that it can not erode, and no beginning or ending that can be pinned still and quantified.

His monitor flashed. Her transmission had come in. His mind went hot and his face went cold.

“I've been praying,” she said. “But what I've been praying for is a change in his answer. I can't stand this recursive prayer; it spirals like bathwater in a drain. Marsuk has given his answer, and he will not change from it. You have invaded his space and his thoughts with your far-reaching fingers; your words have

penetrated to the depths of space. He won't have it. He won't suffer any other children than his own.”

There was a sound like a startled laugh; Rasmir knew that if he could have seen her face, he would have heard it as a sob. They had traded thoughts on the matter before, as had just about everyone on the planet in the past year. They knew that the von Teuer was coming; they learned that the people of the other planet called the comet *Marsuk*. It dominated conversation as it did the night sky.

“Have I told you about our story of birth? The Children-Who-Will-Not-Burn were rescued by Marsuk from a planet on the cusp of extinction. Our first tribe, the five and five, were delivered onto this barren planet. Marsuk dipped his tail in the oceans and filled the planet with rich minerals. Seeds that the five and five had carried in their pockets flourished into plants, and soon the tribe had begun to expand.

“There were generations that grew and faded, and then, in the hundredth year, one of the young faithful found a stash of wet, black powder and, through his gift of ingenuity, sent sticks and old bones sailing into the clouds on fists of gray combustion.

“That's when the Children-Who-Will-Not-Burn, children of the tail of a star, opened our eyes and saw the nebulae and distant suns not as pictures on a backdrop, but as parents, in a way, or distant relatives.

“Marsuk was displeased with the faithful, because such steps toward the heavens were a pretension of power which was not ours. He demonstrated his displeasure with a hail of fire, like turning that young man's sticks and bones back against us. Such is the story, anyway. All through my time as a novice, I believed what her holiness believed, which was that these stories were formed to convey truths and cautions in a way that commandments could not accomplish. We were to avoid hubris, as the story said.

I had never seen Marsuk burn the skies in anger. But now that I know that his rage is not withheld . . ." She trailed off and coughed; it came through like a tinny distortion.

"This isn't what I wanted to say. I wanted to bring you some comfort. I've wasted almost all my time on this. Her holiness will be returning soon. They're going to dismantle the array. They would rather have silence in which to contemplate their measures of regret and pride than listen to the last words of your people.

"Some of us . . . some of us want to see the stars. Not me. I want to pass the stars, to put them behind me. I want them to be the fixtures of a journey that ends with seeing you. I wish I could offer you more comfort. These dreadful years when our faces are turned away from one another — what do you do? It seems that so little has passed between us. So much distance for so few words.

"I have broken my vows irreparably, Rasmir. I can never be silent again, having magnified my thoughts so much larger than my god. It rips the nerves of my heart to think of what he will do to your planet, but I would be lying if I said I wasn't in some way scared for myself. Marsuk will be coming home." This time, it was undoubtedly a sob.

"Please speak to me as soon, as often, as fast as you can. I love you."

Rasmir knew just what he wanted to say. The shape of the thought arrived fully-formed in his mind's eye, almost tangible. He grabbed the microphone in both hands. "Those years pass like instants. Carved-up, half-remembered instants. It's the time here — when I am waiting for your signal, when I am listening to your words, committing them to memory — that stretches to eternity. These are the long seasons, and have been the best of my life." The

shape was gone, used up. He tried to find something else to send. "Look at us. Listen to us. We're like two teenagers, hiding out in a clubhouse where we think our parents can't see us. We're got the danger, the intrigue, the illicit romance.

"What we don't have is time. I could follow my voice, if I had the tools. I could sail on along their path — but at the fastest I can go, I would be long dead before I reached you. We haven't got the time for an escape.

"I am becoming more like a child with each volley of this conversation. From maturity to petulance to this room-for-two solipsism. That's fine. I liked being a child. Here, we had a season of vacation in between three seasons of schooling. The last day of vacation was always the longest day of the year. My friends and I, we would make lists on scraps of printer paper of all the things we had to do. Build a fort, make a pit of mud, ride bikes off a ramp. The day wasn't over until our mothers were hoarse yelling our names, to come home for supper and bed.

"Let's think of our favorite jokes. Let's sing the songs that made us laugh when we were younger. I want to hear the stories of your bible, and I want to tell you about the fire at the hearts of stars."

He opened his mouth a few more times, but everything he thought to add would have cheapened what he had already said. He let the message play out and then zeroed his watch and waited.

Sixteen hours passed. He stood at the window. The von Teuer was as big as a thumbnail, a few degrees off from the moon. He opened a window to drown out the recycled sounds of the machinery and ventilation. Forests surrounded the observatory for miles. They were swaying in a stiff wind, as if the comet were pushing a bow wave of cold air. Needles

rubbed against each other like whispers telling the world to hush.

Seventeen hours, eighteen, nineteen. It was getting cold. He shut the window. Then he turned off the vents. He slumped into his chair and placed the headphones over his ears. He twisted the volume up as high as it would go.

The world will end in static.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian Donnell Arbuckle is a network engineer, husband, and writer. He could always stand some more schooling in each of the three areas. He lives in Washington State and works for a rural hospital.

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